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S E R M O N S

ON

SEVERAL SUBJECTS,

By THOMAS SECKER, LL.D.

Late Lord Archbishop of CANTERBURY.

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MDCCLXX.

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S E R M O N I.

R O M. vi. 21.

What Fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed? For the End of those things is Death.

THE first Resolution, which every one should take in the Conduct of Life, is to deliberate seriously, as soon as he becomes capable of it, by what Rule his future Behaviour shall be formed. And one principal Cause of the Follies, which Men commit, and the Miseries into which they fall, is their strange Neglect of this obvious Duty: a Duty impossible to be controverted; for it is only inquiring what will be most for our Interest.

And yet a very great Part of Mankind never once think of any certain Rule at all for their Conduct; but go on at random, indulging the present Inclination, which Way soever it leads

and how often soever it may vary : and thus fill up a Life of thoughtless Inconsistency, aiming at no one End beyond pleasing themselves any how for the time, let what will follow. But surely a very little Reflexion might shew, that what pleases us now, may ruin us e'er long, perhaps very soon : that different Courses of Life have very different Consequences, highly deserving our Attention : and in particular, that those of a virtuous and a vicious Life differ so extremely, that we ought not to continue an Hour undetermined, longer than we must, which we shall pursue. What the Prophet *Elijah* said to the *Israelites* belongs equally to all of this unsettled Character : *How long halt ye between two Opinions ? If the Lord be God, follow Him : but if Baal, then follow Him*^a. Why this perpetual Wavering and Fluctuation, about the first thing, that you ought to fix ; the one Point, on which all depends ! If a profane and immoral Conduct will produce and secure Happiness to you, follow Profaneness and Immorality, *yield your Members as Instruments of Unrighteousness unto Sin*^b. But if Religion and Virtue be the Means of true and lasting Self-enjoyment, let Religion and Virtue be your Care, and *yield your-*

^a 1 Kings xviii. 21.

^b Rom. vi. 13.

S E R M O N I.

3

Themselves Servants of Righteousness unto God^c. Choose ye therefore this Day, whom ye will serve^d.

And there are indeed Multitudes, that would give sufficient Proofs of having made a Choice, and a very ill one, if running headlong into Wickedness merited the Name of chusing it. But rational Choice presupposes due Consideration : whereas these poor Wretches have suffered themselves to be led on blindfold, by Example and Custom, unexamined Appearances and ungoverned Inclinations, with no more Notion of inquiring, whether they are in the right Road, than if there were no other at all. Or if ever they have deliberated, they have done it unfairly or superficially ; or upon some one Point of their Behaviour, not the whole ; and perhaps, only which of two interfering Desires, both of them wrong, they should gratify. But surely the first Division of human Conduct is into religious and irreligious. Which of these two we ought to prefer, is the Question that we are to begin with : and it will be time enough to consider, in what Way we shall be bad, after we have examined, whether it is not our Wisdom to be good.

^c Rom. vi. 13, 19.

^d Josh. xxiv. 15.

In this most important Inquiry an imperfect View of things may easily deceive us, and doth in Fact deceive the Generality of Mankind. We must therefore be very careful to lay before ourselves the whole of what is to be expected, hoped or feared. But indeed both our own Passions and Appetites, and the Opinions and Practices of the World, will be sure to remind us abundantly of what makes in Favour of prohibited Indulgences. And consequently in order to keep our Judgment upright, we must be diligent in representing to ourselves what makes against them. And we cannot possibly do it in a better Method, than that of the Apostle, addressing himself to the *Roman Converts*: *What Fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed? for the End of those things is Death.*

In these Words is proposed to our serious Thoughts,

I. The present Unprofitableness of Sin.

II. The Shamefulness of it.

III. The Punishment, which awaits it.

I shall be able in this Discourse to consider only the first Point, The Unprofitableness of Sin, even at present. And for this he appeals to the Hearts and Consciences of those, with whom he argues: *What Fruit had ye then in those*

those things? well knowing they must own, that upon Trial they had found none: a Confession, which very few have ever failed to make, when after a Life, spent in Wickedness, they came to reflect coolly, what real Advantage they had gained by it on the Upshot. The Language of those, who will be prevailed on to balance that great Account, is almost universally the same, which *Elibu* in *Job* ascribes to the Penitent, *I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not*°. Some may imagine this to arise from a Disposition, which we have, to be discontented; and to think, after a while, any other Way better, than that which we have chosen. But how comes it to pass then, that no pious and virtuous Man was ever known, calmly and deliberately, to make the same Declaration concerning his manner of Life? Nothing hath been more common in all Ages, than for the Wicked to acknowledge their Mistakes and their Misery, and exhort others to take Warning by them. But the Good, as soon as ever they had Time to become habitually such, have always pronounced themselves easy and happy; and thought it the greatest Kindness, that they could do to those, whom they loved

° Job xxxiii. 27.

the most tenderly, to beg they would tread in their Steps. Now, in other Cases, we look on the agreeing Testimony of those, who have experienced what they affirm, as being decisive. Why then should we distrust them in this alone; and obstinately insist upon trying what they forewarn us aloud will be fatal? Indeed have not some of us tried much too far already? And, for God's sake, let us ask ourselves, what Fruit we have had from it, and what we are likely to have, in case we proceed further.

But if we will reckon the Experience of others incompetent, and our own imperfect, let us consider the natural Tendency of Sin. Should we be unable to discover from thence, why it should do us Harm, we may doubt whether it doth the Harm, that we are told, or will go on to do the Harm that we have hitherto felt from it: but if we see, that in its Nature it must be unprofitable and hurtful, as well as learn from the Experience of others and our own that it is so, then surely nothing will be wanting to convince us.

Now we all know, however apt we are to forget it, that Reason is the principal Part of our Frame: thence therefore, if we are made with any Wisdom, we must expect the principal

pal Part of our Happiness : and yet every Sort of Wickedness is absolutely contradictory to Reason. Undutifulness to an almighty Superior, and Ingratitude to a gracious Benefactor, such as God is ; Unkindness to our Relations and Friends, Hard-heartedness to Persons in Distress, Injustice or Implacability to any one, or Uselessness to those, who are useful to us ; degrading ourselves below the Rank of our Nature, and living only or chiefly to brutal Appetites, though we are Men ; or to trifling Pleasures, though we have Capacities for much worthier Employments : all these things are evidently unreasonable and unfit, as any thing can be. And what Advantage or what Quiet can we hope in disobeying that Principle, which was plainly designed to rule us ?

Besides, our Affections were doubtless originally intended to accord with Reason : and, though much disordered by the Fall of our first Parents, yet in a considerable Measure they do so still. Now can we question, but that Disorder is the Cause of Misery to us here ? And if so, the greater we make it by Acts of Sin, the greater our Misery will be ; and the more we rectify it by Acts of Piety and Virtue, the nearer we shall return to our natural State, in

which alone every thing flourishes and doth well. Right Reason and right Affection were the primitive Rules, that God gave Man to live by : and how can we fancy that we shall ever find our Account in putting a Force upon them, and wresting ourselves from under their Government?

But a farther and very material Consideration is, that all Kinds of Wickedness manifestly tend to destroy the good Order, Prosperity and Peace, of Kingdoms, of Communities, of Families : and that indeed the Injuries which Men do to one another by transgressing the Laws of God make up the heaviest and bitterest Part of the Sufferings of Life. Now what is contrary to the Interest of all in general, must be in some Degree prejudicial to that of every one in particular : and each Person who is guilty of it, *teaches others an evil Lesson against himself*^e. The Vicious, even those who value themselves the most on their good Nature, are one Way or another, perhaps many Ways, perpetually doing Mischief. They are indeed Enemies, as far as their Influence reaches, to the whole Society of Mankind. It is the general Interest of the World to oppose and discourage them. It is

^e Ecclus ix. 1.

the particular Business of Government to restrain and punish them. All that suffer considerably by them, will be sure to abominate them : and most others will scorn and despise them. Now it is a dreadful Evil to lose a Blessing so justly dear to Men, as that of a good Name and Reputation. To be abhorred, or even suspected and distrusted, by those amongst whom we live, is hardly supportable : to be merely disliked and disapproved, is very mortifying. Yet one or other of these they must expect : not only from the religious and worthy, whose Esteem ought to be and ever will be chiefly desired, but also from their Fellow Sinners ; who constantly condemn the Sins, which they do not practise, and often those which they do. Sometimes indeed some of them may join in applauding their common Follies : but that makes them never the less Follies. Sometimes, for private Ends, Persons may flatter for a while such as they inwardly hold in Derision or Detestation. But this Kind of Court never doth Good to those who receive it : nor is it able to hinder but that on the whole mischievous Vices will produce Hatred, and imprudent ones Contempt. And what Fruit can Men reap from such things ?

But

But hitherto you have heard Proofs only of the common ill Effects of all Sins: let us now consider the several Sorts, and the Fruits of each of them, separately.

Some of our bad Inclinations are necessarily, in the very feeling of them, uneasy and painful: as Envy, Hatred and Anger. Others are so at least in their immediate Consequences: disquieting our Minds with wearisome and endless Pursuits, of what we shall either not obtain, or not keep, or be little or nothing the better for, if we do. Such is the exorbitant Thirst of Power and Rank and Wealth: always restless and dissatisfied, always full of Discontents and Disappointments. Again, some of them prompt us to overvalue ourselves, often to our great Damage; and at the same time provoke others to undervalue us: as do Pride and Vanity. Some, if they are accompanied with no Pain, yet can make no Pretence to giving any Pleasure: as Profaneness. And the seeming Pleasure of some others is in Reality scarce more than getting rid of a Torment, which a good Mind would never have experienced. Such, and no better, is the Joy of Revenge. Nay, where criminal Gratifications are the most agreeable, as in sensual Indulgences; besides that they are usually very fleeting and short-

short-lived, perhaps an equal, perhaps a superior Degree of them upon the whole, might by the means of Prudence have been obtained consistently with Virtue: which doth not forbid the regular and seasonable and temperate Satisfaction of any Desire, but only restrains us within due and safe Bounds: whereas the Vicious, affecting immoderate and prohibited Liberties, are indeed the unhappiest Slaves to their own Lusts and Fancies; especially when by a Habit of yielding to them, they have taught them to claim, with absolute Authority, the most pernicious Compliances. And in this Situation, how much inward Anguish must there often lie hid under the gayest Shews of Mirth and Amusement; whether the Soul be oppressed by the settled Tyranny of a single Passion, or torn in Pieces by the Rage of opposite ones, contending for Mastery! * Then, what destructive Effects the Sins of this Kind have on the Healths and Fortunes of their Votaries, disqualifying them, often in the Beginning of Life, for the Enjoyment of every Thing in which they placed the Happiness of it, and exposing them to great

* Sic distrahuntur in contrarias partes impotentium cupiditates: cum huic obsecutus sis, illi est repugnandum. Cic. Tusc. Disp. l. 5. §. 20. Intus etiam in animis inclusæ cupiditates inter se dissident atque discordant: ex quo vitam amarissimam necesse est effici. Cic. de Fin. l. 1. §. 13. Comp. §. 18.

Distresses and Sufferings throughout the Remainder, is much too well known to need enlarging on, though much less considered, than its Importance requires.

But too many imagine, that, whatever others do, They shall sin with Discretion; gratify their Inclinations and carry on their Designs, of whatever sort they be, with so much Art, as to avoid all manner of bad Consequences. But why do they imagine so? It is hard enough to govern our Passions before they have been accustomed to Indulgence. But first to indulge them, and then think to stop where we please, is a Scheme that always hath deceived, and always will deceive, those who are weak enough to rely upon it. Virtuous Behaviour hath plain and firm Ground to stand upon: but if once we quit our sure Footing there, the Declivity is endless, the Tendency downwards will increase every Moment, and how far we may be carried, God only knows. They who have gone the most fatal Lengths in Sin, resolved at first, as much as you can do, to proceed cautiously: never once questioning but they could keep their Resolution, till it was too late. And it may very soon be too late with any of us. For not only the Habit of every Vice leads Men farther and farther

farther in it, but the most different Vices are strangely connected with each other: and he who intended to allow himself in but one seemingly harmless Transgression, is drawn by it gradually, or hurried unawares, into Numbers of worse, that end in his Ruin; the Grace of God being justly withdrawn from such presumptuous Offenders.

But it will be objected, that however unprofitable some Sins may be, yet others are peculiarly calculated for Profit; as Covetousness, with its Retainers, Fraud and Extortion: which the *Wise in their Generation*^b would never practise, unless they found the Advantage of them, as they visibly do. Now if by Advantage be meant, what should be meant, real Happiness, they visibly do not. Covetousness is peculiarly a miserable Passion: and distinguished by that very name of *miserable* in common Speech. The Temper itself is full of Fears and Cares, Alarms and Suspicions. Then, in order to gratify it, every benevolent, if not every honest, Disposition of our Hearts must be contradicted; and when it rises to a certain Height, every innocent Enjoyment of Life, that carries the least Expence with it, must either be renounced, or

^b Luke xvi. 8.

grudged while it is tolerated. But without running to such Extremes, to all avaritious Minds the smallest Losses will be heavy Misfortunes; and the greatest Gains will want something of being so great as they should have been. They must undergo the Pain of envying every one that is in Circumstances above them: they must expect at the same Time the ill Will of every one beneath them: and after all, their unnatural Cravings, far from being appeased, will increase much faster, than their Possessions; and the more eagerly they endeavour to quench their Thirst, the more fiercely it will return upon them. Or let us suppose, if you will, the Desire of Gain to be indulged, not with the absurd View of hoarding to no Purpose and no End; but for the Delight of satisfying more natural Inclinations by the Means of great Wealth: yet, if these be moderate and reasonable, they may be very competently satisfied without it; and, if they be excessive, you have seen already that they are hurtful, and therefore ought not to have Provision made for them.

If then Covetousness of both Sorts be unwise; Fraud and Extortion, which only serve as Instruments of Covetousness, cannot be beneficial. But on the contrary, they have peculiar Disadvantages

vantages belonging to them. There are indeed Instances, too frequently, of Riches acquired by indirect Methods: but still Dishonesty hath ruined many more than it hath raised: and the Ruin of such is never pitied, and seldom retrieved. Fair Dealing is the plain Path, which God hath marked out for Mankind to go in: and they who think to be too cunning for their Maker, are few of them able to depart from it without injuring themselves even now, as much or more than they do others. One half of the Contrivance and Circumspection, that Men are obliged to in a knavish Way, would have enabled them to thrive very well in an honest one, without the Hatred and Curse of all around them, without the perpetual Dread of being detected, and the Loss they must suffer, whenever that happens, (which seldom fails,) both by others declining to have any further Concern with them, and perhaps by the Penalties which the Law will inflict on them. Or let them escape these Dangers ever so well; yet how often doth it fall out, that either what they have acquired wickedly, they squander foolishly, it may be wickedly too, and so nothing remains with them but the Guilt of both; or, at least, Posterity, for whose sake chiefly they have taken these unrighteous

righteous Pains, dissipate in a few Years what they have been accumulating in many; and very possibly give them the Torment, which they have well deserved, of shewing them beforehand, that they will dissipate it! And thus is the Scripture Warning verified: *An Inheritance may be gotten hastily at the Beginning; but the End thereof shall not be blessed*¹.

You see then how many and great the present and worldly Inconveniences of Wickedness are: and I have dwelt on them so largely because present and worldly things are apt to affect us so much. Yet still it must be acknowledged, that all of them do not follow constantly, and that sometimes considerable Advantages in Appearance may be gained by transgressing our Duty. But perhaps even then as considerable ones of the same Kind may be lost by it: for Men cannot have the Benefit of two opposite Characters and Behaviours at the same Time. Or, if every thing should happen to their Wish, the Probability notwithstanding lay greatly on the other Side: the contrary was to have been expected: and therefore no wise Person would ever run the Hazard though now and then some one may chance to find his Account in it.

¹ Prov. xx. 21.

But

But indeed we are as yet only in the first Article of the Account; and have by no means completed that. Not only the positive outward Evils, that Wickedness brings upon us, but the inward Satisfaction and Comforts of which it deprives us, must be taken in. Sincerity of good Will, Openness of Confidence, Faithfulness of Friendship, Tenderness of Affection, Consciousness of merited Esteem, are the sweetest Ingredients in human Life. Now all these, with all the Complacency and Joy of Heart that flows from them, the Wicked, by their ambitious, their covetous, their sensual Pursuits, by their Resentments, their Falshoods, their Neglects, their Provocations, exclude themselves from enjoying: wear out from their Hearts by Degrees the most delightful Sensibilities of which human Nature is capable; and leave nothing there, but the wretched Feelings of hating or disregarding others, and being hated or disregarded by them. Then, in the various Afflictions and Crosses of Life, in decaying Health, sinking Spirits, and declining Age, a good Man hath many Supports, from the Innocence and Integrity of his past Life, from the Love and Gratitude of his Friends, from the firm Belief of a wise and kind Providence, con-

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tinually watching over him. But none of these Consolations belong to a wicked Man, when he is in the same Condition : the things in which he placed his whole Happiness have failed him and are gone ; the Companions of his Prosperity desert him, the World rejoices over him, Heaven frowns upon him, and his own Heart condemns him.

But this would lead me to the second Head, the Shame attending Sin. After that, there remains a third, of the future Punishment awaiting it. Both these, God willing, shall be distinctly set before you : and then you will see in the fullest Light, whatever may seem wanting to the Evidence of it now, that *the Knowledge of Wickedness is not Wisdom ; neither at any Time the Counsel of Sinners, Prudence* ^k.

God grant we may all be convinced of this while it will do us Good ! To Him, with his Son and blessed Spirit, be all Honour and Glory, now and for ever. Amen.

^k Ecclus xix. 22.

S E R M O N II.

ROM. vi. 21.

What Fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed? For the End of those things is Death.

IN discoursing on these Words, I have proposed to lay before you,

I. The present Disadvantages of a wicked Life.

II. The Shamefulness of it.

III. The Punishment, which awaits it hereafter.

The first of these Heads I have finished : and shewn, from the Testimony of the Wicked themselves, from the Inconsistence of all Sin with the Principles of our Reason, from its Repugnancy to the original Dictates of our Affections, from its pernicious Influence on every Branch of human Society, that it must in gene-

ral produce unspeakable Harm to us. Then I proceeded to prove, in relation to several Sins more particularly, that some of them are in their very Nature painful; and that the Pleasures, which others promise, are either false and imaginary, or inconsiderable and short-lived, or, to all the Purposes of real Happiness, equally attainable, for the most Part, by virtuous Means: but that the Evils, which they bring on, are various and great, and often speedy, and seldom avoided by the utmost Care: that even those Sins which may seem peculiarly calculated for Profit and Advantage, are in truth as unprofitable and hurtful as the rest: and that lastly, besides leading Men into the most grievous Inconveniences and Sufferings, Wickedness deprives them of the most valuable even of their worldly Enjoyments, Comforts, and Supports.

Were we therefore only to consider, how unhappily it affects all the common and acknowledged Ingredients of our present well-being, a Course of Sin, on stating the Account merely thus, would be found, though perhaps not without Exceptions, yet with but few Exceptions, and such as no one could rationally expect in his own Favour, a Course of Folly: as accordingly we see it constantly represented,
even

even with respect to this World, not only by the sacred Writers, but the greatest and ablest of Heathens themselves; both such as had some Belief of a future State, and such as had none.

But for our fuller Satisfaction in a Point of this Moment, let us proceed farther to consider,

II. The Shamefulness of it.

Now Shame is of two Sorts : arising from a Consciousness of having acted, either foolishly against our Interest, or wickedly against our Duty. I begin with the first.

An immoral Life being so full of Imprudence and Suffering as you have seen it is, many and severe Reflections on their own mistaken Choice must unavoidably torture the Minds of the vicious from Time to Time, be they ever so industrious to banish them. The Absurdity of the things, which they say and do in the Madness of their Debauches; the Contemptibleness of their Condition, while they languish under the Effects of them; the miserable Wages, which they receive for their hard Servitude to low Appetites; the Meanness of going on with what they have a thousand Times resolved to leave off; the wretched Shifts, that they must use to support the Expences of their Irregularities; the Embarrassments into which the most circum-

spect of them are continually running by unfair Practices; the grievous Disappointments, which the wisest of them experience, from what promised, as they imagined, the truest and highest Satisfaction; the extraordinary Pains which they have taken, to be never the happier, and are taking still, only to be farther from their End than ever: these are Considerations, that will find a Season to make their Way both into the gayest and the busiest Minds, and often embitter the Relish of their Pleasures and their Prosperity, even while they are at the Height.

But when any remarkable Check hath been given to the Sinner in his Course; when the Iniquities of the fraudulent have exposed him to Disgrace and Loss, or the Extravagances of the Spendthrift reduced him to Indigence, when the Strength and Spirits of the dissolute are worn out, or advancing Years have brought on Satiety and Disgust: then, with full Leisure for thinking of their Doings, and perhaps Inability for thinking of any thing else, to see that they have scorned the Dictates of Reason and the Counsels of the discreet and good, only to become miserable; what Confusion must they feel from it: they, who applauded so highly the Wisdom of their own Way of Life, as the only

ly one worth living for, and ridiculed with such unspeakable Contempt the silly Scruples of the poor virtuous Man, whose Conduct they now find so vastly preferable to their own!

But further: this inward Self-displeasure and Dislike will, in such Cases, be greatly aggravated by the Censure and Upbraiding of the World, redoubled upon them when they can bear it least. Sinners in Distress are usually despised and condemned by their very Tempters, and Partners in Sin. All, whom they have injured, will claim a Right to insult them. Those, to whom they apply for Assistance or Comfort, will have a specious Plea for disregarding and rejecting them. The Generality will be eager to shew the Superiority, some of their Goodness, and some of their Prudence, by reproaching them bitterly for their want of both. Even the best and best-natured Persons, while they mourn over them, must remind them how unwise they have been; and on proper Occasions mention them as Warnings to others. *Lo, this is the Man, that made not God his Strength, but strengthened himself in his Wickedness*^a. Now think, I beg you, what must their Feelings, amidst all this, be!

But, besides the Shame of Folly, they have a much worse Kind to undergo, that of Guilt,

^a Psal. lii. 7.

from the Consciouſness, that their Behaviour hath been wrong and unworthy and of ill Desert. For with what Indifference soever many may affect to speak of this, all have at Times, a Sense of it extremely acute. Let any one ask his Heart, what it thinks, when seriously disposed, of Ingratitude for the Being, which God hath bestowed on us, and the Blessings, present and future, which he hath provided for us: of wilful and contemptuous Disobedience to Laws, so reasonable and beneficial, as he hath enjoined us; of scornfully slighting such Offers of Pardon and Acceptance, as our blessed Redeemer hath purchased for us by his Death, and made us in his Gospel; of neglecting the Means appointed for our spiritual Improvement, quenching the inward Suggestions of our heavenly Monitor, and *doing Despite unto the Spirit of Grace*^b. Let any one reflect what his deliberate Sentiments are of Falshood and Treachery, of Oppression and Violence, of Cruelty and Implacability, of hard Heartedness and Insensibility; what Impressions it naturally makes on him to see Innocence betrayed to Ruin under Pretence of tender Affection, the Peace and Honour of Families violated, or the due Order of Society destroyed,

^b Heb. x. 29.

destroyed, to gratify a lewd Appetite ; to see a rational Creature degrade himself below a Beast by Intemperance, and abandon those to Distress, for whom he is bound by the strongest Ties to make Provision. How do these things look in others ? How would they look to you, if you were the Sufferer by them ? Only remember therefore, that they are just the same, when you are the Doer of them ; and then say, if Wick- edness of every Kind doth not abound in Guilt and merit severe Punishment.

Indeed hath not every Sinner, especially at his first Entrance into Sin, had powerful Con- victions of this Truth : found that there were Persons, whom he could not see without Con- fusion and Dismay ; Actions, which he could not think of, without hating himself ? And what can make any one Amends for being in such Circumstances ? He may hope indeed, that in time he shall get rid of these trouble- some Sensations ; and may persuade himself, that afterwards he shall be in as good a Condi- tion, as if there were no Ground for them. But surely most abandoned must they be, who can delight in such an Imagination : who hav- ing once known what Shame is, can be con- tent to live on in a Course of shameful Actions,
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in Hopes of losing by Degrees the Perception of which are so, and which otherwise. What should we think of a Person, who after discerning clearly the Despicableness of Folly, should consent to be changed into an Idiot, merely that he might play the Fool without Restraint from within; and should fancy it to be Comfort enough, that then he should not know the Difference? Yet this Man would be chiefly an Object of Pity: but the others, of utter Detestation. And even this ignominious Hope of theirs will certainly deceive them. For the Faculty of moral Reflection, Conscience, is planted in us by our Maker for this very Purpose, that we may approve or condemn ourselves, according as we act well or ill; and if our Understandings be at all cultivated by Education, it usually gains Vigour enough to answer the Purpose, and cannot easily be rooted out. Whether we will be the better for its Admonitions, is in our own Power; else we should not be free Agents: but feel them we must. And the many Contrivances, which the vicious use to lay the Sense of their Vileness asleep, and the desperate Resolutions which they frequently take when they cannot do it, are abundant Proofs, how sharp the Pain of guilty Reflection may become.

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Some indeed profligately boast of having got over it : and a few perhaps may ; though not near so many, as will at times pretend they have. But what long and tormenting Struggles must they probably have experienced first : and in how deplorable a State must the benumbing and stupefying of so important a Principle of their Nature have left them ! The Loss of bodily Feeling and Motion is but a faint Image of it. And after all no one can be secure, that something may not still awaken this dormant Power, when he least expects it. Some great and mortifying Disappointment, some remarkable Stroke of God's Providence, some alarming Passage in his Word, some affecting Discourse from the Pulpit, some experimental Confession of a Fellow Sinner, nay merely some instantaneous Turn in his Mind, for which it is impossible to account, may present on a sudden a most tremendous View of himself to his own Eyes : or some other Person may be induced or provoked to lay his Crimes in order before his Face, perhaps before the World. And then, whatever Ascendant he may have gained over his Conscience before, imposing on it with specious Colours, or calling off its Attention from his past Behaviour, yet then he will be forced to behold

behold things as they are; and appear not only wretched and guilty to himself, but an Object of Abhorrence to others. Now general bad Opinion is hard enough to be born, even when the Mind is supported by Innocence: but when Infamy is accompanied with the Conviction of deserving it, almost intolerable. For the Feeling is not only dreadful in itself, but fills the Soul with endless Jealousies and Suspicions, distracting Horrors and Fears, even of Dangers the least probable. *Wickedness, condemned by her own Witness, is very timorous; and being pressed with Conscience, always forecasteth grievous Things^c. The Wicked are like the troubled Sea, when it cannot rest, whose Waters cast up Mire and Dirt: there is no Peace, saith my God, to the Wicked^d* Whose Notice soever they escape, the very worst the basest of their Deeds lie constantly open to his View: and what *Shame of Face^e* and Dread of Heart must that awful Recollection excite!

Sometimes indeed these inward Pangs drive Men, as it was intended they should, to deep Humiliation, to Prayer for Pardon, to laying hold on God's Mercy through the Merits of Christ, to zealous Amendment, through the

^c Wisd. xvii. 11.^d Isa. lvii. 20.^e Ps. xlv. 15.

Aid of the holy Spirit. And then it is doubtless happy to have felt them; but by no Means to have committed the Iniquity, that caused them: for an equally devout Application to Heaven with a greater Degree of Innocence, would have been still more graciously received, and more bountifully rewarded: unless they to whom *many Sins are forgiven, love much*^f and work diligently in proportion; which many unquestionably have done: but who can promise himself that he shall do it, and shall be allowed to experience the Joy of doing it? On the contrary, as the Self-Condensation, which produced this mighty Change must have been extremely painful during the Accomplishment of it; so afterwards, and perhaps long afterwards, it may prove a Burthen heavy enough to convince a very sincere Convert, that an early and continued Obedience would have been much preferable to his truest Repentance. And therefore, as most Sinners endeavour to quiet themselves with a Prospect of Repenting some time or another, they ought most seriously to consider, what Remorse and Dejection they are treasuring up for themselves in the mean while, though they should do at last what such artful Offenders have

^f Luke vii. 47.

little Cause to believe they ever shall. Observe but the Case of those, to whom the Text immediately relates. They were *made free from Sin*, as the next Verse tells us, they had *brought forth Fruit unto Holiness*, they were in the Way to *everlasting Life*: yet the Apostle calls their past Faults, knowing doubtless what he said, *those things whereof ye are now ashamed*. And indeed let any one in the same Condition say, whether his Comforts are not often embittered, and his Prospect clouded, by mortifying Remembrances of his former Transgressions: whether he hath not frequently returning Doubts of God's Forgiveness; whether he well knows, how to forgive himself.

But very commonly Shame comes at last to surround the Sinner on all Sides in such a manner, that he is ashamed to repent though he perceives the Necessity of it in the strongest Light: and between his Agitations of this Kind, and the Tyranny of his unlawful Desires, authorised by habitual Indulgence, he is reduced to the most lamentable State that the present Life knows or can know: continuing the Practice of Wickedness with his Eyes open to all its Deformities and Dangers: condemning and abominating him-

himself for what he doth, yet going on to do, what he condemns and abominates.

Thus you see what internal, as well as external, Sufferings, naturally belong to irreligious Courses. It must however be acknowledged, that, though always to be expected, they do not always arise to near the same Height. For sometimes the worst of Men continue in the most unaccountable Prosperity, of Health, Circumstances and even Reputation. Sometimes also Education, Example, general Custom, false Reasoning, may in a considerable Measure take off the Shame of several Sins, and give a Sort, such as it is, of Credit to them. Some Persons likewise either have originally, or soon acquire, such an Insensibility of Heart or giddy Thoughtlessness, that they do not undergo what others do, when they have acted amiss. And therefore, lest any Possibility should remain to flatter any one, that he may be wicked, and yet escape what he deserves for it, the Apostle, to deter us effectually from Sin, hath added in the Text

III. The future Punishment, that awaits it,
For the End of these things is Death.

That awful Word is well known to signify, in many Places of Scripture, a State of Misery, as Life doth of Happiness. They are here placed
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in direct Opposition : and the Meaning evidently is what our Saviour elsewhere expresses : *These shall go away into everlasting Punishment ; but the Righteous into Life eternal*®.

It might be very sufficient to determine the Choice of Man, that Wickedness essentially tends to produce Misery to its Authors, and generally doth produce it, though now and then the Case were to prove otherwise. But God is further concerned: and the Attributes of his Nature and the Honour of his Government require, that no one Sinner shall ever have Cause, upon the whole, to rejoice in his Iniquities, and glory in his Disobedience. If our Maker is all wise and almighty, he can provide for this : if he is just and holy, he will. For else this World of his would be ruled, as we ourselves can feel, and much more then must He, that it ought not. Possibly so minute a Regard may appear to some, beneath him. But if it was not beneath him to create all things, it can never be so to conduct them to their proper End. If he superintends continually, as he doth, even the least Part and Movement of the material Creation, can it be unfit for him to watch over the

® Matth. xxv. 46.

Actions of rational Beings? For what is there worthy of his Attention, if they be not?

These Considerations, confirmed by our inbred Sense of the ill Desert of Wickedness, yet opposed again by Instances of its seeming Impunity, and by the frequent Calamities of the good, raised in the Minds of Men, from Age to Age, perplexing Doubts concerning the Providence of God; to which however all other things around them gave full Testimony. Sometimes they solved the Difficulty, by discovering that the seeming Happiness of the Wicked was not real: sometimes by observing that it soon ended in great Misery. Yet they were often forced to take Refuge and intrench themselves in their general Assurance of the Divine Justice; though when and how exercised, they knew not. But there being no Appearance at all of a constant and proportionate Exercise of it in this Life, the wisest and best of them reasonably concluded, there must be another, designed to rectify whatever was wrong here. Yet a future and unseen State of Existence, in which we were not to share, till our present Frame was dissolved, had the Look of an Object too remote for human Faculties to discern with Certainty: so that many good Men were tempted to question it;

and those of an opposite Character too easily brought themselves to disbelieve it. At least the Convictions and Presages of it, which they industriously stifled, had no uniform Influence on their Conduct. And therefore, after various Intimations of this great Truth given from above, to the earliest and following Ages, for some Confirmation of what Reason suggested, God hath made it fully known to us Christians that *he hath appointed a Day, in the which he will judge the World in Righteousness by that Man whom he hath ordained^h: a Day of Wrath and Revelation of his righteous Judgment; when he will render to every Man according to his Deeds: to them that obey not the Truth, but obey Unrighteousness, Indignation and Wrath, Tribulation and Anguish, upon every Soul of Man that doth Evilⁱ. So that now, to use the Words of Job, Hell is naked, and Destruction hath no Covering^k.*

Here then is a Consideration, before which all that can be said or imagined in Favour of Sin vanishes at once. And were it constantly as productive of Pleasure and Profit and Esteem in the World, and as consistent with Peace in our own Breasts, as it usually is the contrary,

^h Acts xvii. 31.ⁱ Rom. ii. 5, 6, 8, 9.^k Job xxvi. 6.

yet would not a Moment's Deliberation be necessary in order to renounce it. For what God will punish, never let Man hope to be happy in.

The very Apprehension of his punishing, the *fearful looking for of Judgment and fiery Indignation*¹, which no one, who believes in God and disobeys him, can possibly avoid long together, is enough to sour the very sweetest of unlawful Enjoyments, and in the Midst of Mirth to sink the Heart with Heaviness. Let every Sinner consult his own Heart, if it be not. Or how little soever he may feel or dread this at present, yet no one can tell, how soon and how deep *the Arrows of the Almighty* may be fixed *within him, the Poison of them drink up his Spirit,* and *the Terrors of God set themselves in Array against him*^m. Or could he go on speaking Peace to himself through Life, yet the Approach of Death may rouse him on a sudden from this Dream, and croud such Horrors into the small Remainder of his Days, as will far exceed the longest Enjoyments of past Sin; Horrors accompanied with the insupportable Aggravation, that so far as Man can judge, they seize him too late to do Good.

¹ Heb. x. 27.

^m Job vi. 4.

But what avails it, if the wicked could escape the previous Fears of Judgment, since they cannot escape the Judgment itself? *For behold the Day cometh, that shall burn as an Oven, and all that do wickedly shall be Stubble; and the Day that cometh shall burn them up saith the Lord of Hostsⁿ.* As to the Particulars of this Punishment, Curiosity is by no means the Disposition it was intended to raise: and for the Degree and Duration of it, we are incompetent and partial Judges of our own Deserts, even in our most serious Hours; and much less are we qualified in the Seasons of thoughtless Gaiety and bold Self-confidence. God alone knows what is just and requisite: and from his Declarations we must learn our Fate; whose Threatnings are in in all Respects as alarming as Words can describe; and we may assure ourselves they will not be found vain Terrors. Undoubtedly the Sufferings of Men will be as different hereafter, as their Guilt is here. But whosoever shall sin presumptuously in Hopes of a light Punishment, will by that very Presumption merit a heavy one. And who is able to conceive, to what the lowest Degree may amount, of the Misery that will then proceed, from the final and exem-

ⁿ Mal. iv. 1.

plary Vengeance of Omnipotence on impenitent Offenders, from the bitter Reflections of their own Consciences on their Folly and Vileness, in first disobeying God, injuring their Fellow-creatures, perverting themselves, then refusing the Reconciliation which their Creator offered them, their Redeemer died to obtain for them, their Sanctifier was ready to apply to them; and lastly from the Absence of all Comfort and all Hope in those Regions, *where their Worm dieth not, and their Fire is not quenched* °? *For such are the Dwellings of the Wicked; and this is the Place of him, that knoweth not God* ^p. *Can thy Heart endure, or can thy Hands be strong, in the Day that I shall deal with thee? I the Lord have spoken it, and will do it* ^q.

The Subject is much too dreadful to be enlarged on farther: and it would ill become, did not the Ministry committed to us require it, one Sinner to denounce against another, Terrors like these. Far be it from us to *make the Heart of the Righteous sad, whom God hath not made sad* ^r; or afright the penitent, humble, vigilant Believer with *devouring Fire and everlasting Burnings* ^s, instead of teaching them

° Isa. lxvi. 24. Mark ix. 44, 46, 48.

^p Job xviii. 21.

^q Ezek xxii. 14.

^r Ezek. xiii. 22.

^s Isa. xxxiii. 14.

to rejoice and triumph, that *there is no Condemnation to them, who are in Christ Jesus* *. But whatever wilful or habitual Transgressor, whatever Person hitherto indifferent or inattentive to the State of his Soul, at any Time hears us, to him we must say, if there be any Conviction of your Danger awakened in your Breast, do not suppress it, do not run away from it, do not suffer Company, Amusement or Business to wear it off: but go, and in secret bewail yourself before God, earnestly beg Pardon and Grace for the Merits of your crucified Redeemer, throw yourself entirely on the Mercy freely offered in his Name, firmly resolve, in Confidence of his Strength, not your own, against all Sin, all Imprudence, all Negligence for the future; and recollect every Day of your Lives that solemn Admonition: *Be not deceived: God is not mocked: whatsoever a Man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his Flesh, shall of the Flesh reap Corruption: but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap Life everlasting* †.

* Rom. viii. 1.

† Gal. vi. 7, 8.

S E R M O N III.

GAL. vi. 10.

*As we have therefore Opportunity, let us do
Good unto all Men : especially unto them, who
are of the Household of Faith.*

WE are all born with a natural Principle of Love to our Kind : we all see and feel the Exercise of it to be fit and right : and the continual Need, which we have, of the Service and Friendship of others, continually reminds us to be serviceable and friendly in our Turns. Were Men universally so, the World would be as happy, as our Endeavours can make it. And though it is not universally so, but far otherwise ; yet whoever determines to practise this Duty himself, let those around him do as they will, is sure to find his Account in the Course, which he takes. For he will generally acquire a large Share in the Esteem, and good Offices of Mankind ; especially of those,

whom he values : and he will always experience a delightful Consciousness of intending well to them, and deserving well from them. But his chief Advantage beyond Comparifon is, that if his kind Actions proceed from a devout Sense of God's commanding them ; and humble Trust in the Aid of his holy Spirit for performing them ; and a lively Faith in the Merits of his blessed Son for the Acceptance of them ; he will then be intitled to the present Protection and final Approbation of his Maker and Judge : who hath declared, that our Treatment of our Brethren shall be a principal Rule, by which he will go in his Treatment of us. The Truth of these things is universally acknowledged : the Inference, that we are most highly concerned to be mutually useful, is extremely evident : and yet of how very little Use are most of us, compared with what we might be ; and how much do we lose and suffer by our Neglect !

The Causes of so general a Failure undoubtedly are various. Reciprocal Provocations and Resentments are both a powerful and a common one. Another, still more extensive, is, that wrong judged Selfishness, which possesses Men with such a blind Eagerness for their own Interest,

Interest, that they cannot allow themselves to stay and think, in what it consists; and thus they fail of receiving, as well as communicating, the Satisfaction, which a different Conduct would produce. But besides these, others, by no Means ill disposed towards their Fellow-creatures, contribute much less to their Benefit and Comfort than they might, either from not observing how frequently Occasions for it present themselves, or from not distinguishing rightly the proper Objects of their humane Intentions. And therefore it may promote considerably the Practice of this Duty, if we make some Reflexions, as the Text leads us,

I. On the Opportunities, which we have, of doing Good.

II. On the Choice of the Persons, to whom we do it.

I. The Opportunities. Now these are so many, of one Sort or another, that some have understood the Apostle to speak here of our whole Life, as one continued Opportunity. And therefore, in the Sentences before the Communion, his Words are translated, *While we have Time, let us do Good unto all Men.* Life is the Time allotted for this Purpose. It must be for some End, that we are placed together

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in Society: and it could not be for a worthier, than to copy and perfect in ourselves the Image of our Maker, by cultivating and exerting a benevolent Spirit, one towards another. We were purposely made so necessitous and mutually dependent, that Means for the Exercise of mutual Goodness might never be wanting. And indeed scarce a single Part of our Behaviour is of so wholly an indifferent Nature, but some of those about us will be, more or less, the better or the worse for it.

Consider, what unceasing Opportunities there are of acting agreeably or disagreeably, even in the slightest Intercourses of human Life. One shall be, as the Son of *Sirach* expresses it, *like a Lion in his House*: terrible to all who approach him, especially at times; and perhaps for no Manner of Reason; no good one, to be sure. Another shall be cold and dry, dark and distant: and perplex, as well as offend, such as have to do with him. A third, by the habitual or unseasonable Melancholy of his Looks and Discourse, shall banish all Comfort from the Place, in which he lives or appears. How vastly preferable to this unsociable Deportment is a Behaviour of constant universal Humanity;

* Ecclus iv. 30.

a Care

a Care to contribute, on every common Occasion, to the Peace and Ease and innocent good Humour of those, with whom we converse.

Possibly such Matters may be thought too inconsiderable to be mentioned in this Place. But the Scripture hath mentioned them. *Courteousness* is expressly enjoined there ^b. *A merry Heart doth Good like a Medicine* ^c. And indeed, far from being small things, they are very great ones. Many have so tender a Sensibility of Mind, at least in respect of those, with whom they are nearly united by Nature or Choice, that the very Happiness of their Lives depends on their receiving gentle and affectionate and encouraging Treatment. Again: the Expectations of many concerning their most serious worldly Interests are likely to succeed or fail, just according to the Regard, that such or such a Person hath for them: and therefore every minute Alteration in his Countenance or Speech to them, makes a considerable one in their Way of thinking of their own Condition.

Nay, without any thing so particular, in all Circumstances, unkind, or merely negligent Behaviour gives Men Pain, and may do them further Prejudice: while on the other Hand,

^b 1 Pet. iii. 8.

^c Prov. xvii. 22.

not only the more important Evidences of good Will support and revive the Spirits, but the slighter Expressions of it have no slight Effects on those, to whom they are shewn. We commonly set about greater things with the Temper, into which little ones put us. And therefore, if we come to them soured and disgusted, tho' perhaps it be owing to somewhat entirely unconnected with them, we shall be apt to judge unfavourably, to proceed in what lies before us with Harshness, and be very different Creatures from such, as nothing hath chanced to ruffle. It is also by repeated Acts, that Habits are acquired : and therefore, if we are often discomposed, though it be about Trifles, the State of our Minds will be gradually formed by the Impression, which those Trifles make. Besides, great Opportunities of exercising Humanity fall, comparatively seldom, in our Way : but these lower Demonstrations of Friendliness we can all give continually : so that were each of them singly of much less Value than it is ; yet frequent Repetitions of them, like a Multitude of small Sums, would swell the Account beyond Imagination. And a further Consideration still is, that many other Instances of Kindness only provide Men with Materials for the
Enjoyment

Enjoyment of Life ; which they may have in Plenty, and enjoy it scarce at all the better : whereas amicable and obliging Demeanor adds directly to the Enjoyment itself.

But I proceed now to our several Opportunities of what is more usually called *doing Good* : though indeed there would be little need of specifying them, if Men would but attend to what passes in the World, with the View, which they ought. Where Distresses and Sufferings are so common, the Occasions of preventing, or removing, or alleviating them, can seldom, if ever, be far from us. But our Attention, for the most Part is paid, not to those who want it, but from whom we can promise ourselves the most profitable Returns for it. As to the Afflicted and Helpless, if we do not, what is too often done, take the Advantage of insulting or oppressing them, at least we are extremely prone to avoid and slight them ; though, before their Misfortunes, they had perhaps received many Professions of Respect and Service from us, and possibly merited them by Service done us. Yet we can make their Difficulties the Entertainment of our idlest Conversation with perfect Unconcern : be wondrous wise and happy in pointing out and aggravating their

ill Conduct: and if we do but drop an unmeaning Declaration of being sorry for them; or gratify our Spleen by censuring those, who are more immediately bound to assist them, and yet omit it; then we think we have discharged our Duty abundantly. Nay, even when the Care of them belongs to us in particular, we can make false Pleas of Inability; or invent, or however improve, little Subjects of Resentment against them, when all Resentment, how well grounded soever, should be utterly forgotten, and lost in Compassion.

While Men are of such a Disposition, no Wonder if they see but few Opportunities of doing Good. Nothing can make them visible, if we blind ourselves purposely. But let there *be first a willing Mind*^d, and Cases enough, God knows, too many, will present themselves, and call aloud for Assistance. The need of study will be, not how to find out Wants, but how to supply them. And yet, were we, besides taking Notice of what forces itself upon us, to set apart now and then, a little Time for considering wherein we could be helpful to any about us; or to enquire, if no Occasion offered amongst them, where else we could meet

^d 2 Cor. viii. 12.

with fit Objects of Benevolence, it would surely be nothing more, than the Condition of human Nature, the Sympathy of Man with Man, and of Christian with Christian, recommends to us all.

It is very true, most Persons ought to fix their Thoughts chiefly on their own Business: and if they neglect that for the sake of serving others, may do great Injustice to those, for whom they should be principally concerned, and soon come to want the Help, which they go out of their Way to give. But still there are many disengaged enough from private Cares, to make the Good of their Neighbours their principal Concern. And God, who hath given them Leisure for it, will expect it from them. Nay indeed sometimes, the more Affairs Men have upon their Hands, the more Ability they have on that very Account, of being useful, in various Methods, to their Fellow-creatures. And whoever will keep the Desire of doing Good present always to his Mind, will easily discern many more Opportunities for it, than any one else can possibly point out to him.

It may however be expedient to mention some distinctly. But the particular Advantages for this Purpose, which Persons of high Rank, Magistrates,

Magistrates, Parents, Masters, Teachers, or any others, have by Virtue of their respective Stations, though deserving their utmost Regard, are too many for me to enumerate now : and therefore I shall only set before you some of the Means, by which, independently of such Relations, we may be serviceable to each other.

They, whom greater Abilities, or closer Attention, or more Experience, have made better Judges, either of the Conduct of Life in general, or of such and such Affairs in it, must frequently have noble Opportunities of directing the ignorant, and setting the mistaken right; of preventing the Distresses of this World, and even the Punishments of the next. Advice indeed, is too commonly given so as to produce little, if any, desirable Effect: at improper Times, in a haughty and provoking Manner, perhaps with a visible Intention of only shewing our Authority, or superior Wisdom. And therefore it exasperates and hardens, instead of convincing and reclaiming. Nay, it may be feared, there are those, who had rather their Counsel should not be followed; that they may triumph in publishing afterwards the ill Consequences of disregarding it. But they, who really desire to do Good in this Way, and will
apply

apply themselves with any Degree of that Care to prevail with others, which we use in bringing them over to serve our own private Interests, (and in Truth, doing Good is our most important Interest) may certainly discover many fit Seasons and Methods of recommending Prudence, Virtue, Religion, to those with whom they converse.

Our Opinion sometimes is directly and sincerely asked, in a Point of Consequence. Then it is barbarous to refuse it: and almost, if not quite, as bad, to give it with an artful Reserve, concealing or disguising something material. But if Men do not ask us: it may be they know not, whom to ask, or how it would be taken, or have not the Courage, or possibly are proceeding wrong without Suspicion. How excellent a Charity now must it be, in any such Case, to do another a most essential Piece of Service of ones own Accord! Not every By-stander indeed, who finds himself inclined to dictate, is authorized to intermeddle. But real Well-wishers, who know the Circumstances of an Affair, and may have Weight, should not be too backward; and, for Fear of losing their Labour, or possibly displeasing, suffer another, perhaps a Friend, to fall into great Inconveni-

ences, which speaking a few Words might have prevented, and secured his Esteem and Gratitude ever after. Nay, if prudent Advice is not followed so soon, or so well, as might be wished; we ought not immediately to give up any one, either in Anger or Despair. Good Sense will easily perceive, when there is no Room left for Hope: and till then, good Nature will try on.

But indeed, when we have no Opportunity of giving Counsel to any particular Person, who hath taken a wrong Course, or is in Danger of it; being careful to set the Example of pious and virtuous and discreet Behaviour, is giving the best Counsel silently to all around us. And, if we do but join with it fit Evidences, on fit Occasions, of our approving, in others, Innocence and Beneficence, and disliking Folly, Wickedness, and Impiety, *our Light will so shine before Men*, that we may justly hope some at least will be led by it to *glorify our Father, which is in Heaven*^f, and become happy here and hereafter.

A second very valuable and very amiable Species of Kindness is, expressing Concern for the Characters of those who are unjustly attacked. Every one must be sensible, how sadly

^f Matth. v. 16.

Detraction and Calumny prevail in the World ; how many Things utterly false are related, and how currently believed ; what aggravating Circumstances are added, and invidious Turns given to Things in which there may be some Truth, quite sufficient to alter the Nature of them ; and how much, not only of Vexation, but Mischief, is caused, both by the malicious and the wanton Liberties, taken in this Respect. Here then opens to us a large Field of performing most useful and acceptable Services one to another ; which must, in the End, redound also to our own Quiet and Security ; by shewing a general Dislike of Slander ; and, where we can, the particular Reasons for disbelieving it. For we ought no more to let the Reputation, than the Person, of any one be wounded, if we can prevent such Cruelty. But, above all, we should contradict Falshoods, when we are known to be acquainted with the Truth : else we shall be understood to confirm them. Indeed, Opposition made to injurious Reports, by some Persons, at some Times, especially of epidemical Unreasonableness, may be to little Purpose. But then it is the peculiar Duty of such as have Credit and Influence, to stop the Progress of such Wickedness : not to let it go on, and secretly

ly rejoice in it because it serves their Turn ; but honestly do Justice to their keenest Adversaries ; and consider Enmity, as a peculiar Advantage for doing it effectually : because our Testimony in their Favour will be sure to obtain Belief. And making this Use of our Situation will not only be truly Christian, and singularly generous ; but the likeliest Method, either of putting an End to the Difference, which should always be our first View, or of continuing it, if it must continue, with great Honour to ourselves.

A third Way of being useful is, paying due Regard to the worthy and able, wherever we find them : shewing Countenance to such, instead of those who deserve or want it not : assisting them, when they set out with less favourable Circumstances of Friends or Fortune, or cannot submit to the usual Arts of advancing themselves, and are pushed back by the forward Boldness of other Competitors. Or, if we are not able to serve them ourselves, at least we may contribute to make their Merit known : particularly to such as can help them, and perhaps may be glad of their Help : so that we may do a great Kindness to both at once. And if such Occasions do not offer, it may frequently be worth while to bestow some Pains in

Search

Search of them : not contenting ourselves with Wishes in their Behalf, when a moderate Degree of Diligence would procure them what we wish ; nor counting the Happiness of a deserving Person so small a Matter, and our own Trouble so very great a one, as to make a Difficulty of taking a few Steps, that we should not have chosen else, when it may promote so desirable an End.

These, and others that might be mentioned, are unexpensive Ways of doing Good : which generally will enlarge, not restrain, our Capacity of doing more. But the most usual Notion of this Duty is communicating of our Plenty to supply the Necessities of our poor Brethren. And Wealth may often be expended to the great Benefit of others, yet at the same Time, with no mighty Loss, if not a Prospect of Gain, to ourselves. For as the best Method of relieving the able Poor is employing them ; so there are many, who, if they would contrive for it, might employ them to their own Profit : as others might in such Works, as would be Conveniences, Ornaments, and rational Amusements. And so far as helping them to live comfortably is the real Motive to these things, they are all real Charities.

But supposing that we have no other Way of doing Good by laying out Money, than what in Strictness of Speech is called Alms; bestowing without Expectation of any Return from the Receivers: there are very few, but can give in this Manner, now and then, enough to be a most welcome Relief to one or another of the wretched Objects every where to be found. And many more than do, can afford frequent and large Liberalities, of various Kinds. Now these greatly mistake, if they imagine, that the Duty of Beneficence out of their worldly Substance is sufficiently discharged by some small and almost insignificant Distributions to the lowest Part of the Poor. As the Providence of God hath placed different Persons in different Stations; whatever is truly requisite (for I speak not of such imaginary Wants, as Vanity and Fancy frame; but whatever is really needful) to support Men decently in the Rank, which Propriety obliges them to maintain, is nearly as necessary to them, as meaner Accommodations are to others. And if they have much less, their Difficulties and Straits may be extremely pitiable: which is one thing, that merits the careful Attention of the Rich; especially with regard to their Relations, Friends and Dependants. But indeed we should all attend to every thing,

thing, from whence a Claim upon us, either of Mercy or of Bounty can arise.

Many perhaps have not sufficient Knowledge of particular Persons in Distress to bestow amongst them so much as they ought to bestow in Charity. But it is easy for them to find those, who have. And if they are unwilling, though it must be without Reason, to trouble or even to trust such; there are public Charities of various Kinds, in any of which, both the smallest and the largest Sums may be undoubtedly well employed.

It is true, extending our Bounty so wide may cramp our other Expences: and possibly so much the better. It may prevent or lessen the Increase of our Fortunes: but that may well happen, without the least Harm done us. What we have no Occasion for, and probably never shall, can be of no Value to us. And therefore, as it is impossible, that Men should for ever have Occasion to lay up still more for their Families, there must be Multitudes, to whom parting with what will make many of their Fellow-creatures lastingly happy, is in Effect parting with nothing. But where it is something, and even much; surely the Consideration, for which we part with it, the Good of one or more of our Brethren, is a very just

and weighty one : besides that our own Good is most deeply concerned in it, as I hope you have seen. Indeed, had we no other Inducements to Acts of Charity, it would be adviseable to do frequently such as are adapted to our Abilities, were it only to prevent the Love of Money from fixing and growing upon us, and to mortify that wretched Craving for more, by withdrawing from it Part of its Food.

But all Motives of worldly Prudence in favour of any Kind of Beneficence, are infinitely weaker, than those by which Religion invites us to every Kind : the Love, the Example, the Command of our Maker and Redeemer ; enforced by the Assurance, that we are then employing most wisely our Thoughts, our Time, and our Property, when they are spent in the most judicious Endeavours, that we can use, to serve and benefit any Part of Mankind ; and are then most effectually securing our own Interest for ever, when we shew the most affectionate and extensive Concern for the Interests of those around us, in proportion to the Importance of each. *As we have therefore Opportunity, let us do Good unto all Men. And let us not be weary in Well-doing : for in due Season we shall reap, if we faint not.*

§ Gal. vi. 9.

S E R M O N IV.

G A L. vi. 10.

As we have therefore Opportunity, let us do Good unto all Men : especially unto them, who are of the Household of Faith.

IN discoursing on these Words, I have already shewn, what various Opportunities we have, of promoting the Happiness, and preventing, removing, or alleviating the Afflictions of our Fellow-creatures : by the good Nature and Courtesy of our common Behaviour to them ; by Information and Counsel occasionally given them ; by a due Concern for their Characters and Reputations ; by our Countenance, Favour, and Interest ; and, if their Condition require it, by assisting them with our Substance also.

I proceed therefore at present, as I originally proposed, to shew you

II. Who are the proper Objects of our Kindness.

Now

Now concerning this, the only general Rule undoubtedly is that of the Text: *Let us do Good unto all Men.* He, who hath created us in his own Image^a, is loving unto every Man; and his Mercy is over all his Works^b. He maketh his Sun to rise on the Evil and on the Good, and sendeth Rain on the Just and on the Unjust^c. We ought therefore to approve ourselves the Children of the Highest, by being merciful, as our Father also is merciful^d: and, whatever Station the Wisdom of his Providence hath allotted us, fill up the Sphere of our Influence, be it greater or less, with Acts of Kindness. The Affection of Benevolence was planted in us, and the Exercise of it enjoined us, not for the Advantage of some few Particulars, but of all human Kind: and whoever is capable of being the better for us, ought to be the better; if we can make him so, without neglecting others, who have stronger Claims upon us.

In many Cases, which I have mentioned to you, doing the most important Service to one Person will not at all diminish our Ability of doing as great to others. Communicating of our Property indeed will: and here we are not

^a Gen. i. 27.

^b Psal. cxlv. 9.

^c Matth. v. 45.

^d Luke vi. 35, 36.

to understand our Saviour's Precept, *Give to every Man that asketh of thee*^e, in the utmost Extent of the Words, any more than several other of his Precepts. *Giving to every one* thus, unless it were so little as to be of no Use, would soon disable us from giving to any one; indeed from supporting ourselves. And therefore his Meaning must be only, that no Person should be excluded; either out of Selfishness, which is a common Fault, or out of Malignity, as the Samaritan Woman at first would have excluded him for being a Jew^f, and as many of the Jews excluded the Heathens for being Idolaters: but that we should extend our Beneficence to all of all Sorts, on proper Occasions, as far as can be reasonably expected.

Suppose therefore an entire Stranger to apply for our Charity: if the Law provides a Method, as in this Nation it doth, by which the Truth of his Complaint may be examined, and Relief granted him, in Case it proves to be true; directing and referring him to that, will, ordinarily speaking, be sufficient; and doing more will encourage idle Vagrants and Cheats. But if the legal Provision doth not reach to his Case; or if the Officers intrusted with it are so hard-

^e Luke vi. 30.^f John iv. 9.

hearted as to reject him; (which is too frequent;) and we have Means to find out, and Leisure to inquire, whether he wants Help; and have Cause to think he doth, and are able to give it him; it is Relation enough to us, that he is of the same Nature with us; and Recommendation enough, however unacquainted with him we were before, that his Necessities have brought him to our Acquaintance now.

Suppose farther, that such a one is of a different Party, a different Country, a different Religion, from our own; these things ought to be no Bar in the least to any needful good Offices from us: and we shall do the more Honour to the Party, the Country, the Religion, of which we are, the more tender Compassion we shew him.

Farther still: let Persons have done us Injuries; let those Injuries be as great as we think them, though they seldom or never are in Reality: yet they remain human Creatures, which alone requires of us Humanity towards them: and we have perhaps also injured them; at least in other Instances we have offended both God and Man; and ought to forgive, as we hope to be forgiven.

If indeed any unnecessary Kindness will certainly, or in all Likelihood, produce Harm upon
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the whole ; whatever Appearance of good Nature, Friendship, Generosity, it may wear ; we must remember it is a false Appearance, and abstain from it as immoral. But otherwise the Rule is, to do Service gladly to every one of our Fellow-creatures.

Not that we are bound to do them equal Service. Their Titles to it may be very unequal ; and where there is a Difference, we ought to make one. Nor, be that of any one ever so strong, should we so exhaust ourselves upon any single Object, as to leave Nothing for others, which in the common Course of Things must fall in our Way, and may deserve at least as much Notice. But then, on the other Hand, we must not reject those, who need Assistance now, under Pretence of reserving ourselves for worthier Petitioners hereafter ; be always waiting for a fitter Occasion than the present, and perhaps never find it : an Artifice, which, it may be feared, some have employed. Indeed, Evasions are easily invented, in this whole Matter of doing Good, by those who seek for them. And all, that the Teachers of Religion have in their Power towards preventing it, is, first to remind Men, that every one's true Interest consists, not in fencing against his Duty, and getting

ting rid of it, but in learning and performing it; then to state the Grounds, which different Sorts of Claimants have to look for Kindness from them: and so leave it, both to the Benevolent and the Selfish, to shew what they are, and take the Consequences.

The first and usually strongest Claim, is Proximity of Kindred. They who are nearly related to us, belong immediately to our Care. Others have a Care of the same Kind, incumbent on them. And the Good of the whole is best secured by the due Attention of every one to his own Part. Accordingly God hath interwoven in our Nature powerful Instincts, which admonish us continually of this Obligation: and yet hath admonished us of it again by express Words of Scripture. *If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own House, he hath denied the Faith, and is worse than an Infidel* *. But then it must be observed, that *providing* plainly appears from the Context, and from the Use of the Word in other Places, to mean in this, not, laying up for them without End still more and more, which is often no Duty at all; but, maintaining them properly out of what we have, which is always an im-

* 1 Tim. v. 8.

portant Duty. And even, where both these things are needful, both may be done; and much Room left, in large Fortunes especially, for Acts of Beneficence to others. But here now is one Instance, how easy it is to make plausible Excuses for neglecting plain Precepts. What Plea can look fairer, than making Provision for those who are united to us by Blood or Affinity? And who can fix the Bounds of that Provision for another Person's Family? Yet Bounds there are, beyond which we cannot really increase their Happiness; nay, beyond which we ought not to consult their Interests. The Duty of taking Care to put them in good Circumstances is but one of many, concerning the Disposal of our Income: and if it be carried farther, than is fairly consistent with the rest, great Wickedness may be committed under Colour of it, and often hath been.

Another Ground of Preference in doing Good is Friendship: which indeed we are not bound to contract with any one: but when it is contracted, (and we find our Saviour himself had his beloved Disciple) the Ties of it are by no Means to be disregarded. Friendship, when strict, comprehends a tacit Agreement and Covenant between those who enter into it to look
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upon the Concerns of each other in a great Measure as their own. Mere Intimacy of Acquaintance is a lower Sort of Friendship. Cultivating both Sorts by mutual kind Offices contributes very much to the Enjoyment of Life: and may contribute to the Improvement of each Party in Knowledge and Goodness, as well as to the Advancement of their worldly Prosperity. Others, it must be supposed, have their own Friends zealous for Them: and we are to have a proper Zeal for Ours. Not but that one, who was unknown to us before, may often, if his Merit or Want be considerably greater, justly expect, that we should give him the Preference. And it is no less blameable, than common, to promote the Interests of those, with whom we are connected, beyond reasonable Bounds: raising them to Stations, perhaps of Consequence, for which they are not qualified; and depressing, for that End, others, who have Pretensions far better founded. Such Friendships are plain Confederacies against Equity and public Good. And if this be true, even in the Case of real and well-chosen Friends, much more strongly doth it hold in that of mere Favourites, whom we have adopted from arbitrary Fancy, or Liking to their obsequious Behaviour. For

indeed

indeed worthy Characters will seldom condescend to the Meannesses requisite for gaining and preserving immoderate Degrees of Fondness. But were that otherwise, private Partialities ought never to take Place of Reason and Justice. When they do, it is false good Nature, and gross Iniquity.

A third Title to peculiar Regard, is that which Persons acquire by having done us Favours. We are in Strictness the Debtors of those to whom we have Obligations: and should always be contriving to make as prompt Payment, with as large Interest, as possible. It is perhaps one of the heaviest Discouragements to useful and kind Actions and Undertakings, that a suitable Return for them is so seldom made. The Hopes of Gratitude prompt even the selfish to many obliging Deeds, of which they would not otherwise have thought. And the Exercise of Gratitude propagates and multiplies new Kindnesses continually. We should therefore treasure it in our Memories, that if the Inequality of other Circumstances be not very considerable, we are always to do Good, where we have received it. Yet still, when there would be any shocking Impropriety in this, we must excuse ourselves for the present, and make the

speediest and fullest Amends, that we can, some other Way.

But besides those, who have a Right to the especial Notice of some, there are others peculiarly intitled to the Compassion of all.

And the first Rank of these consists of such, as the Scripture calls, in a spiritual Sense, *wretched and miserable, and poor and blind and naked*^h: who are wholly or nearly destitute of Christian Faith and Hope, and ignorant of the indispensable Rules of Life. Multitudes there are of such, even in this enlightened Nation: and Multitudes more, who can scarce help knowing their Duty, live in almost a total Disregard to it. Now their Case is the sadder, as it gives little Concern to the Generality of other Persons, and perhaps none at all to themselves. Yet *their Feet go down to Death, their Steps take hold on Hell*ⁱ. Therefore, as Parents are chiefly bound to see, that there be none such amongst their Children; Masters and Mistresses, to look after them in their Families, and Ministers in their Parishes; so all People are bound in Proportion to think, what they can do likewise towards *causing the glorious Light of the Gospel to shine into the Hearts of Men*^k.

^h Rev. iii. 17.

ⁱ Prov. v. 5.

^k 2 Cor. iv. 4, 6.

Of temporal Claims to the Kindness of all without Distinction, the principal constant one is undoubtedly that of Poverty : especially when Sickness or Losses happen, or Work is scarce, or Seasons rigorous, or Provisions dear, and many Mouths to be filled. They indeed who prefer an idle and vagabond Life of Beggary before honest Labour, ought not to be encouraged in it by Relief, but abandoned to the Wretchedness, which they chuse. The Law of God passes Sentence on them, *If any one will not work, neither let him eat*¹: and the Law of the Land corrects them justly for the needless Weight, which they hang upon Society. Nay, such as cannot now labour, if they have brought themselves into Straits by Debauchery, Negligence or Extravagance, though they must have some, yet it should be a sparing Maintenance, unless deep Repentance plead in their Favour. But the Distresses of those, who are brought low without their own Fault, and have striven to support themselves as long as they could, should be alleviated with the tenderest Pity. Especially, if they be friendless, as well as helpless, this makes the Height of a compassionate Case. A Man in this Situation may nominally

¹ 2 Theff. iii. 10.

have many and able Friends ; yet if they will take no competent Care of him, he is to be considered as really having none : and their neglecting him is far from being a Reason, why others should do likewise.

We may indeed alledge, to excuse our Parsimony towards the Poor, that we are afraid of Impositions, and of throwing away our Charity. But then why will we not, where there is any Likelihood of Truth, make Inquiry ? Believing every one, to be sure, is feeding the Unworthy with what the Deserving ought to have. But resolving to disbelieve every one is a mean Contrivance to spare our Money, which both God and Man will see through. Very possibly, after our best Care, we may sometimes be deceived. But the more Danger there is that many of our Endeavours to do Good may fail, the more Care we ought to use, that some Part however may succeed : imitating the Wisdom of the Husbandman, who commits to the Earth perhaps more than double of the Corn that he expects to bear Fruit ; and observing, that under a similar Image, the Scripture hath expressly given this very Injunction. *In the Morning sow thy Seed, and in the Evening withhold not thine Hand : for thou knowest not, whether shall prosper, either this or that ;*

that; or whether they both shall be alike good^m. But one thing we certainly know, that all Attempts, directed by our best Judgment to the Benefit of others, will at least benefit ourselves. For they will improve in us by Exercise a merciful Disposition; and recommend us to his Approbation, who graciously accepts the Will for the Deed.

Every Way of doing Good hath some Advantage, peculiar to itself: but relieving the distressed Poor hath many considerable ones. Uneasiness is much more strongly felt, than Satisfaction: and therefore taking away Pain is making a greater Change for the better, than adding Pleasure. Besides, there is oftener Room for it: and it is commonly sooner done, and at less Expence. Bestowing what would scarce make one in moderately good Circumstances happier at all, would give Comfort and Joy to great Numbers of the Indigent. And further still, the Sufferings of the Poor are true and real: the Wants of others are frequently imaginary, and on several Accounts unfit to be supplied.

But though Poverty, I mean when joined with Sobriety and Industry, hath the strongest Title

^m Eccl. xi. 6.

to our Regard; yet the two latter alone, though accompanied with no Distress, greatly merit Countenance and Favour. Frugality and Diligence in a lawful Calling are hopeful Marks of an honest Mind. And it would be very hard, that they, who do their best, should, for Want of Encouragement, fail to thrive and rise: especially considering, that, while they labour for themselves, they labour for the Public too.

These good Qualities are yet more deserving of Notice when they are adorned by Knowledge and Skill. For not only every thing valuable ought to have its Value properly acknowledged; but preferring Persons of less Abilities to others of greater, may occasion many to suffer by their Ignorance: and it disheartens Men from Attempts of excelling, to which they should always be excited.

But the highest Sort of Merit, beyond Comparison, is that which the Apostle singles out in the Text to recommend by the Expression of *the Household of Faith*. All good Christians, being through the Grace of God conformed to his Likeness, and adopted by him to be Heirs of Salvation, are therefore, when taken separately, called the Children of their heavenly Father; when jointly, his Family or Household.
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And there being no Admittance into this Family, or Continuance in it, but by such a Belief of Religion, as produces an uniform Practice of it, therefore it is called *the Household of Faith*.

And one Reason for directing the primitive Christians to do Good especially to their Brethren in the Faith, probably was, because the Generality of them were of the poorer Sort, and yet were least likely to meet with Assistance from others: their Heathen Neighbours being offended by the Singularity of their Notions, and condemned by the Strictness of their Lives: on which Account it was very needful, that the rich Members of their own Communion should consider them in the first Place.

But another main Reason doubtless was, that Christians were, what the Design of Christianity is to make them, more religious and virtuous than other Men, and therefore bound to treat one another as being so. They were to prefer a Fellow-believer in their Benefactions, not only for belonging to the same Body, but because *the Righteous is more excellent than his Neighbour*ⁿ. And this points out a Way for us also, though *the Household of Faith*, in outward Profession and Appearance, is of equal Ex-

ⁿ Prov. xii. 26.

tent with our Country, to observe however the Spirit and Intent of the Apostle's Precept, by making it one great Rule of all our Charities, to be most liberal to the truest Christians; that is, the most pious and virtuous and honest Persons. In this Sense his Direction is so extremely reasonable and important, that the Heathen Emperor *Julian*, writing, 300 Years after, to the Heathen High Priest of these very *Galatians*, to whom this Epistle is written, could not forbear inserting it in Words so nearly the same, that there can be no Doubt, from whom the Thought was borrowed. *Let us therefore, saith he, communicate of our Substance to all Men, but more freely to those of good Minds*°. And certainly nothing can be more judicious^p. Every Kind of Distinction ought to have a proportionable Regard shewn it: and therefore the highest and most honourable ought to have the greatest. The private Prudence of acting thus,

° Κοινωνητεον ουν των χρηματων ἅπασιν ἀνθρώποις· ἀλλὰ τοῖς μὲν ἐπιεικιστὶ πλεονεκτητέον· τοῖς δὲ ἀποροις καὶ πενήσι, ὅσον ἵστασθαι τῇ χρείᾳ p. 290. Ed. *Spanh.* Though ἐπιεικιστὶ may seem opposed to ἀποροις, and therefore to signify what sometimes *bonesti* doth in *Latin*, and *the better Sort* in *English*; yet I find not, that it hath that Sense. And *Julian*, a little before, saith we must not neglect τῆς πενήτας, ἀλλῶς τε οὕτω καὶ ἐπιεικῆς τινὲς τυγχάνει τοῦ τρεῖτος. And *Arist.* Rhet. l. 1. c. 2. §. 3. uses ἐπιεικῆς for a good Man, and ἐπιεικεία for a worthy Character.

^p Donabit [sapiens] aut bonis, aut eis quos facere poterit bonos. Donabit cum summo consilio, dignissimos eligens. Sen. de vita beat. c. 23. where, and c. 24. see more.

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though a selfish Reason, deserves Mention ; that whoever assists a worthy Person, may be sure to have the Favour gratefully received ; and as far as possible, repaid ; whereas on others there is no Dependance. *When thou wilt do Good, saith the Son of Sirach, know to whom thou doest it : So shalt thou be thanked for thy Benefits. Do Good to the godly Man, and thou shalt find a Recompence : and if not from him, yet, from the most High^a. For God, who, to speak in the Language of St. Paul, is the Saviour, the Preserver and Benefactor, of all Men, but especially of those that believe^r, expects us to imitate him, not only in the Universality of his Beneficence, but in the peculiar Notice, which he takes of the fittest Objects of it. And accordingly we find, that this was the deliberate, solemn Resolution of the Psalmist. O my Soul, thou hast said unto the Lord, thou art my God. My Goodness extendeth not to thee : but to the Saints that are in the Earth ; even to those, who excel in Virtue ; in whom is all my Delight^s.*

It is one of the oldest Complaints in the World, that no sufficient Difference is made between the Good and Bad in the Distribution of Happiness. And though it belongs only to the

^a Eccles. xii. 1, 2.

^r 1 Tim. iv. 10.

^s Ps. xvi. 2, 3.

great Judge of all to remedy this Evil completely, as he will at the last Day, yet we should every one contribute our utmost to lessen it in the mean Time. Not only the Interest of Religion requires it of us, but that of Mankind; who will always be miserable in Proportion as they are wicked: and it is encouraging Wickedness, not to encourage Virtue. This Neglect, in those who have Power and Influence, produces unspeakable Mischief: and in all Ranks downwards, it must be of far greater Consequence, than is generally apprehended, to lay hold on every Opportunity of shewing, that we respect and will befriend worthy Characters, and think no Obligation superior to that of supporting Piety and Morals in this Manner.

Thus I have gone through the chief Claims, that can be made to our Regard in doing Good. The more of them unite in one Person, the stronger his Plea becomes: and if, at any Time, being divided between several, they make the Rule of our Conduct seem dubious; let us only take Care to preserve an impartial Desire of acting rightly, and we shall make few, if any, Mistakes of great Importance. *The Integrity of the Upright shall guide them: and the Righteousness*

*teousness of the Perfect shall direct his Way*¹.

Most of our Difficulties about the best Sorts, and fittest Objects, and requisite Proportions of Beneficence, arise, it may be feared, not so often from real Ignorance or Doubt, as from Unwillingness. Let us all therefore endeavour first to conquer that, by reflecting seriously on the many and strong Motives, that urge us *to do Good and to communicate*²: let us form our Minds, with the most assiduous Care, to a Temper of universal Benevolence and Love, not to be exercised now and then only, on extraordinary and distant Occasions, but to animate the whole of our Behaviour to each other. To the exactest Vigilance over ourselves, let us join our most ardent Prayers to God, that his holy Spirit, for the Sake of his blessed Son, may quicken, restrain, direct us; and then let us cheerfully go on our Way: where the Case is plain, follow the Dictates of an honest Heart without Hesitation; where it seems perplexed, judge as well as we can, without Scruple or Terror. For we serve a most gracious Master: and so long as we serve him with a sincerely right Intention, we shall probably seldom err from our Duty, and certainly never fail of our Reward.

¹ Prov. xi. 3, 5.

² Heb. xiii. 16.

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S E R M O N V.

MATTH. v. 6.

*Blessed are they, which do hunger and thirst after
Righteousness : for they shall be filled.*

WHATEVER Objections the Vain or Vicious make against Religion, they must allow, if they have any Regard to Truth remaining, not only that nothing else promises Happiness hereafter, but that nothing is so likely to give Happiness even here, as that Disposition of Mind, to which Religion proposes to bring us. For he, who loves God sincerely, and obeys him willingly, and trusts in him cheerfully ; who delights in doing Justice and shewing Goodness to his Fellow-creatures ; and takes Pleasure in regulating his Conduct by the Dictates of Reason and Scripture ; studying to be useful in his Station, and keeping his Heart shut against every hurtful Indulgence, while he
opens

opens it in a proper Degree to every innocent Gratification, hath unquestionably the truest Enjoyment of his Being, that is possible. He destroys not his Health by Intemperance, nor his Fortune by Extravagance, nor his Character by criminal or mean Behaviour. He generally obtains Esteem and Friendship from others ; and he always feels the most comfortable Testimony of his own Conscience. Whatever he denies himself, or parts with, it is for a valuable Consideration, the Discharge of his Duty : whatever he suffers, he escapes the greatest of Evils, Remorse and Shame ; and he enjoys the greatest Good, a conscious Sense of the divine Favour, conducting him graciously through the Afflictions of this Life to an endless Felicity in the next, that shall be the more abundant for them : and where shall we find upon Earth a securer, an easier, a more joyful Situation ? Right Actions, it must be owned are often accompanied, in the Beginning of a Christian Course, with great inward Struggles. But they diminish continually, in Proportion as a right Temper is formed : and when we arrive at a proper Maturity in Goodness, we shall be intirely free from Difficulties, and absolutely at Peace.

But

But then it is objected, that allowing such a State to be ever so happy, we have no Prospect of attaining it in a sufficient Measure to afford us any Feeling of that Happiness. And Experience is imagined by too many to confirm this Apprehension. Most of those who live either in Vice or Neglect of Piety, make at one Time or another warm Resolutions, and, it may be, vigorous Attempts, to throw off wrong Habits and become religious. But they find it an unpleasing, laborious, painful Work. And let them endeavour as earnestly as they will; nay, be, ever so much persuaded for a while, that they have gained considerable Ground; they are very liable to relapse, more or less, into their former Transgressions or Omissions, contrary to all their Hopes. Daunted at this, they draw immediately a hasty Conclusion, that Nature is not to be altered, and Custom is second Nature: that it would be well for them indeed, if they had that Command of themselves, that some have: but how much soever they may envy them, they must of force be content with their own Condition; for it signifies nothing to strive against what they shall never get the Master of, or aspire to what they shall never arrive at. And so they sit down satisfied with this Plea, lay

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afide the Thought of growing better, and then of course grow continually worse. Yet plainly, if endeavouring would prevent that only, it would be worth while: for, next to being good being as little bad as we can, is our evident Interest, with respect to both Worlds.

But we may justly hope for much more. And that we may not doubt of it, our Saviour hath assured us of it. In the very Beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, he lays it down; *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after Righteousness: for they shall be filled.* Whoever truly desires to become pious and virtuous, and pursues that great Point in the right Method, with due Perseverance, shall never fail of attaining his End. And the whole Word of God teaches the same thing. Why then should we not believe it, and act on that Belief? If we act without it indeed; our Attempts will be as faint, as our Hopes. But *this is the Victory, that overcometh the World, even our Faith.* Not a presumptuous Faith in ourselves alone: that will certainly deceive us; and is the very Cause, that so many fall to their utter Ruin, when they thought they stood firmest: but a Trust and Reliance on the promised Grace of God,

^a 1 John v. 4.

through

through him who died to obtain for us Power, as well as Pardon; a fixed Persuasion, that *we can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us*: which he doth by a double Assurance, of present Help, as well as a future Reward. This Help he hath expressly engaged to every Christian, in every Difficulty, on the reasonable Terms, of humbly praying for it, and honestly making use of it. What should hinder us then from *working out our own Salvation*, when God is ready to *work in us both to will and to do*^c; both good Desires, and the Accomplishment of them? Our bad Inclinations may be too hard for us; but not for him. He will certainly qualify us for what he commands and expects: else his Precepts would be Mockery, and his Punishments Cruelty.

But still it is alledged by many, that in fact, though they do both endeavour and pray, they cannot become good, even in their outward Behaviour; much less in their Hearts. And perfectly good we do not say they can become at present: but why not sufficiently to enjoy from it much Peace and Comfort? Let us examine the pretended Impossibility of this a little more distinctly. It is confessed, our spiritual Frame

^c Phil. ii. 12, 13.

is weak, and was grievously disordered by the Fall. But however, though *in our Flesh*, to use the Words of the Apostle, *dwelleth no good thing*, yet *after the inward Man we delight in the Law of God*^a. Through his Mercy we have still right and worthy Principles, as well as wrong and bad ones. We have still Dispositions in our Breasts, to esteem and honour Goodness, to be grateful for Benefits, to observe the Commands and submit to the Disposal of a just, wise, and kind Superior. Now these, directed to their properest Object, Almighty God, are Love, Obedience and Resignation to him, in which consists a Spirit of Religion. We have also by Nature, not only tender Affections in the nearer Relations of Life, but a general Sense and Approbation of Honesty and Truth, of Goodwill, Pity, and Forgiveness towards all with whom we have to do: and these things comprehend our Duty to our Neighbour. Then, as to what we owe to ourselves: reasonable Creatures must think Reason ought to be followed, rather than Passion and Appetite; must condemn the Excesses, that destroy their Understanding or Health; and be shocked at Violations of Decency and Modesty. So that, in Truth, we have the Seeds

^a Rom. vii. 18, 22.

within

within us of every thing good, as well as evil. And all we need is, to cultivate the one, and pluck up the other, and we are what we should be. It is acknowledged, we have not Strength of our own to root out our Vices: and our Virtues will never bear Fruit, without kindly Influences from above. But since God is ready to give us all we really want, we may labour with full as much Assurance of succeeding, as if we had it of our own.

There are Instances but too many, of Persons bringing themselves into Habits contrary to Reason and Nature: why should it be impossible to acquire such, as agree with both? We can abstain from Faults, for which we have ever so great a Love, when our Interest requires it, when some favourite Pursuit or Fancy is served by it. This cannot therefore, in general, be extremely difficult: for very often the Motive to such Self-denial is trifling enough. And why do we then persuade ourselves, that Love of God and our Duty, and Hope of eternal Happiness, and Fear of eternal Misery, cannot have an equal Influence upon us? The Truth is, we need but try heartily, and we shall find it can; shall find that we are able by a firm Resolution, founded on Faith in Heaven, to abstain from any one sinful Action whatever:

and therefore, by repeating the Resolution, from any Number of such Actions.

Indeed merely restraining the outward Acts of Vice is not being virtuous: Virtue consists in the inward Disposition of the Heart. But a Course of such Restraints uniformly carried on with that View, will as certainly, in Time, change our Dispositions in this Respect, as we see it doth in all others. We grow contented, and pleased, by Degrees, with every Place, and every Way of Life, we are put into: and become fond at last, of what we were once quite indifferent about; nay, of what we disliked very much. But besides the general Force of Custom, there is a peculiar Complacency, connected by our Maker with the Performance of our Duty; which the longest Habit of Sin, cannot so intirely extinguish, but that, whenever we return to the right Way, our Heart will applaud us for every Step we take; joyful Prospects will open to us, and invite us on through every Difficulty; till at length we shall get beyond them, and find *the Ways of Wisdom Pleasantness; and all her Paths, Peace* *.

Perhaps this may not be so soon, as we could wish or expect. Yet, not uncommonly, God

* Prov. iii. 17.

meets

meets the very first Advances, that he hath inclined Men to make towards him, and changes their Hearts almost totally at once. But be it ever so long, what have we else to do, but go on and wait his Time? Attaining a religious State of Mind is not a Matter, at which one would aim only if it could be acquired in a short Space, and with little Trouble. It is the great, the one thing that we have to be concerned about in Life: what must be done, or we are miserable; and if once done well, makes us happy for ever. Therefore, how slow or how difficult our Progress may be, is little to the Purpose: we should go on with more Pleasure indeed, if we went on faster and smoother: but our Business is, to go on as we can. And whoever hath Strength enough to make a Stand, may quickly have enough to gain Ground; and, by pursuing his Advantage, will undoubtedly at length get a complete Victory.

I am very sensible, how often this fails to be the Case. But the Reason is: either Men do not set about reforming themselves with the Sincerity, the Spirit and the Prudence, that they do about other Points of Importance; or they have not Patience to persist in it.

Most People, far from wishing to mend their Faults, are very unwilling to know that they have any. Now what can be the Meaning of this? In all other Employments, whoever is desirous to do well, examines carefully into the Defects of his own Work, receives with Thankfulness the Judgment of his Friends, turns to Use even the Censures of his Enemies; and from whencesoever the Knowledge of any Imperfection comes, hath no Quiet, till he hath corrected it to the best of his Power. But is it thus we act in the Government of our Hearts, and the Conduct of our Lives? If not, whence comes the Difference? Doubtless from hence, that we are not so sincere in one Case, as the other. It is not *Righteousness*, Piety, and Virtue, that we *hunger and thirst after*; but a fair Shew, even though it be a false one, to others and ourselves. We have small Regard to what promotes not this: and what lessens it, we consider only as an Injury and a Loss; not at all as an Opportunity given us of reforming and improving our Hearts and Lives, notwithstanding that we profess the strongest Desire of it.

But suppose a Person ever so desirous to conquer some Vices, yet if he indulge others; or suppose he endeavours to get rid of all Immoralities, yet
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if he allow himself in Profaneness or Forgetfulness of God, his Aim is inconsistent, and he must not hope to succeed. Every Virtue is connected with every other Virtue : all Virtue is connected with Religion : and they will not flourish apart. Specious Appearances there may be : but not useful Realities. We must *hunger and thirst after universal Righteousness*, not one Part only, if we expect to be filled from above.

Nay though we should wish to grow better in all Respects, yet wishing it faintly, and attending to it slightly, will never effect it. If we make Riches, or Power, or Pleasure, or any Thing else of this World, our great Aim ; and look upon the religious and moral Government of ourselves as an inferior Matter ; not to be overlooked indeed, but requiring only so much Regard, as these more Important Affairs will admit ; our Improvement in it will be very little, if any at all : *For we cannot serve two Masters*^f. But did we once see, and well keep in Mind, that Piety and Virtue are our Business here ; that forming our Hearts to a practical Esteem of Reason and Truth, to a Temper of Justice and Goodness towards Men, of Reverence and Obedience to God, of Love to Christ, of Joy in

^f Matth. vi. 24.

the Holy Ghost, is our main Concern, compared with which every thing else is nothing: it would make a wonderful Difference, both in our Diligence and our Success.

But still the greatest Diligence may fail, unless we proceed in a proper Method. If we resolve against Sin; and will not resolve to be on our Guard against the Things, that lead us into it: If we desire to *grow in Grace*; and will not use the Means, which God hath appointed for our Growth in it: what wonder is it, that we fail? Nay, though we take the rightest Methods imaginable, and proceed in them, for a Time, with the greatest Spirit: yet if, after a while, we become *wearied, and faint in our Minds*, and leave off; all our past Labour will be in vain. We cannot indeed keep to the same Pitch constantly: but whenever the want of it hath betrayed us into a Fault, we can recover and raise ourselves up to it again. And though a fresh Repetition of the same Fault were to succeed often; yet, Recollection and fresh Resolution may be repeated as often, till through the Grace of God they become effectual.

But here People usually object; they cannot resolve against Sin more strongly, than they

2 Pet. iii. 18.

Heb. xiii. 3.

have

have done : yet their former Resolutions have stood them in no Stead : and to what Purpose is it to make more ! Now every one sees, how absurd this Way of thinking would be in the Affairs of common Life. Scarce any one succeeds at the first Trial, usually not till after many Trials, in almost any Thing they go about to learn. And yet what do they do ? They endeavour on : and though perhaps they cannot possibly be more in earnest at last, than they were at first, yet insensibly, themselves know not how, they overcome the Difficulty so intirely, that very often neither any Feeling, nor any Notion of it remains.

Let us therefore imitate their Perseverance ; and not be impatient, and out of Hopes, because of a few Failures : always think lowly of what we have done ; but always highly of what through God's Help, we may do. Being uneasy at our past Miscarriages, is indeed a Duty, so far as it teaches us to be humble, to ask Pardon, and strive to behave better. But if we do Nothing but dwell upon and aggravate our Fault to our own Minds ; till we have so little Opinion of, and so little liking to, ourselves, that we have no Heart to set about Amendment ; a Sensibility, thus excessive, defeats its own End ; and becomes

becomes a new Sin, added to all the former¹. We must therefore never despair, and give up our Case as incurable, and our Souls as lost: for they are not so. God is our Physician; and no Disease is too inveterate for him. We have only to study and follow his Directions faithfully, and the final Event is infallible. If we fail in our Duty; we may, if we will, from that very Failure get more Strength and Skill for the future: by observing, through what Wrongness or Weakness in our Temper, what Rashness or Negligence in our Conduct, the Advantage against us was gained; and thinking, what Precautions will be most effectual against another Trial. A moderate Share of Time and Pains, honestly spent thus, would give us happy Earnests of obtaining at length an intire Conquest: which however, though always possible, will be much the easier and surer, the earlier we prepare for and engage in the Conflict; before we give the Enemy Leisure to strengthen himself, by further weakening and corrupting us. *My Son, gather Instruction from thy Youth*

¹ Πρωτον μεν καταγνωθι των γινομενων. ειτα καταγινους, μη απογινωσκεις αυτε. — αλλα μαδε το των παιδοτριβων. Πεπρωκε το παιδιον; Αναστας, φησι, παλι παλαι, μεχρις αν ισχυροποιηθης. Ολησαι δι, κ' γεγωνε. — ω: παλι απουσαξαι, κ' απολωλεν. *Arrian Epict. l. 4. c. 9. versus finem.*

up: so shalt thou find Wisdom till thine old Age. Come unto her as one that ploweth and soweth, and wait for her good Fruits: for thou shalt not toil much in labouring about her, but shalt eat of her Fruits right soon.—My Son, if thou wilt, thou shalt be taught: and if thou apply thy Mind, thou shalt be prudent.—Let thy Mind be upon the Ordinances of the Lord, and meditate continually in his Commandments: He shall establish thine Heart, and give thee Wisdom at thine own Desire^{}.*

But supposing the worst, that we have been negligent or even grossly sinful in time past; yet not only Reason and the Promises of Scripture, but Experience proves the Possibility of our Recovery. Did not *David* recover from Adultery and Murder, *Manasseh* from Idolatry, *Zaccheus* the Publican from Covetousness and Injustice, *Peter* from denying Christ, *Paul* from blaspheming and persecuting? Have not Multitudes in all Ages, many in our own, some perhaps known to us, recovered from the vilest Acts, from the longest Habits of Sin? Why then cannot we do what they have done?

It must be confessed indeed, that some have naturally Dispositions much more favourable

^{*} Eccclus vi. 18, 19, 32, 37.

both to Innocence and Repentance, than others. But God hath made none of his Creatures incapable of what he made them for. And since he condescends to help us, we may be sure he will help us as much as we really want. The Weakness of Man, the Force of Temptation, the Difficulty of Duty, are of small Account, where the Almighty is ready to interpose. Our own Strength indeed cannot increase, in proportion as our Trials do : but that, which proceeds from him, can. And this is the great Felicity of our Dependance upon him, that while our Sense of continually needing his Aid is fitted, beyond all things, to keep us humble; our Assurance of having it, if we will ask and use it, gives us a Comfort and a Spirit, that nothing else can equal.

God will certainly enable us to do every Thing, which is necessary to be done. And though he may possibly suffer us to strive against some of our smaller Faults, much longer and more ineffectually, than we could wish ; yet we may be assured, he hath wise and good Reasons for exercising us with such Difficulties : and provided we continue *the good Fight* with Patience and Courage, whatever Labour and Pain it may cause us now, it shall not hinder, but increase

our

our Reward hereafter : and the Prospect of that, is abundantly sufficient to make us happy in the mean while. Not that we can ever fit ourselves to appear before God, and be justified in his Sight, on the footing of a Covenant of Works. Far be from us the haughty Imagination. We desire to be accepted, not for what we have done, but for what our blessed Redeemer hath done on our Account : *and to be found in him, not having our own Righteousness, which is of the Law, but that which is through the Faith of Christ, the Righteousness which is of God by Faith*¹. After this we are to *hunger and thirst* both as the Means of personal Righteousness, and the Ground of God's accepting it. In this alone we are to hope first, and rejoice afterwards.

Yet still, *if in this Life only we had Hope in Christ, we might sometimes be of all Men most miserable*^m. Not but that, even then, a steady Course of Virtue and Religion would in general be evidently for the Interest of Mankind, and almost of every Individual. But after all, there would be Cases too often happening, in which the Trouble of combating evil Inclinations and Habits would be so great, the Progress in Goodness so imperfect, and the Enjoyment of it so

¹ Phil. iii. 9.^m 1 Cor. xv. 19.

precarious and short-lived ; that human Resolution must be supposed likely to stagger and faint, under such Trials. But since we are assured of enjoying to Eternity in Perfection, whatever Graces we have cultivated here with Sincerity ; the Toilsomeness of the Work, and the Slowness of the Success, ought not to deter us in the least. Let the Watchfulness over our Conduct, the Restraint of our Passions, and wrong Desires, be ever so uneasy ; let this Uneasiness last ever so long ; let our Advancement, after doing our best, be mixed with ever such mortifying Failures and Frailties : yet, if we be faithful unto the End, every one of these seemingly discouraging Circumstances will have full Allowance made for it, and be most equitably considered to our Advantage. We have only to take care of our Duty ; and the Goodness of our Maker will be sure to take care of our Happiness. Nor is it indeed, could we but think aright, of very great Consequence, whether we begin to taste that Happiness, in any considerable Degree, during our momentary Life on Earth ; which however truly good Persons, almost if not absolutely without Exception, do ; or whether it be reserved for that approaching Time, when all they, that have *hungred and thirsted after Righteous-*
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ness here, shall be abundantly filled with the Plenteousness of God's house, and made to drink of the River of his Pleasuresⁿ. For with him is Fulness of Joy, and at his right Hand there are Pleasures for evermore^o. Therefore, my beloved Brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the Work of the Lord: forasmuch as ye know, that your Labour is not in vain in the Lord^p.

^a Pf. xxxvi. 8, 9.

^o Pf. xvi. 11.

^p 1 Cor. xv. 58.

S E R M O N VI.

JAMES i. 27.

Pure Religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the Fatherless and Widows in their Affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the World.

TO understand the Meaning of these Words fully, it must be observed, that St. *James* wrote his Epistle to the *Jewish* Believers in Christ; many of whom were not yet sufficiently apprized, how grievously the Traditions of their Elders had corrupted Religion. For long-received Errors are seldom entirely cast off, till some Time after the Truths, which, by evident Consequence, prove them to be Errors, are embraced. These new Converts therefore, being accustomed from their Infancy to think very highly of that Purity of Faith and Worship, which was their principal Distinction from the Heathen World, continued even after they

were Christians, to give it an undue Preference to the weightiest Duties of common Life. Their Opinion of ceremonial Worship indeed the Gospel had probably lowered: but it must have increased their Esteem of Faith. And though it was easy to understand that no Faith could be valuable, unless it brought forth the good Fruit of universal Obedience; yet wrong Inclinations led many to mistake the Matter: who accordingly contenting themselves with a speculative Belief, and formal Devotion, thought and spoke ill of those, who either differed from them in religious Tenets, or laid any great Stress on moral Practice. Now had the Apostles indulged Imaginations and Behaviour so agreeable to corrupt Nature, undoubtedly they would have gained by it a much larger Number of Disciples. But *they had not so learned Christ*^a. Each, as Opportunity presented itself, diligently opposed this dreadful Perversion of *the Doctrine according to Godliness*^b; but none with a warmer Zeal, than St. James: who, presiding over the Christians of *Jerusalem*, must have had the most Experience of it. He therefore, throughout this whole Epistle, pleads earnestly for observing the moral Duties, Bene-

^a Eph. iv. 20.^b 1 Tim. vi. 3.

ficence and Self-government: the latter to be exercised in our Words, as well as Actions.

But especially in the Text, he hath exalted them so high, that he may seem, and I fear hath been apprehended by some, to exclude every thing else, as unnecessary. For what Occasion is there, it may be said, to concern ourselves about Acts of Piety, when we are plainly told by an Apostle, that a good-natured inoffensive, regular Life is the whole of our Duty? Now had the Apostle told us this, he would have contradicted both Reason and himself. If right Sentiments and Behaviour be requisite in some Cases; they must in all. If the good Qualities of our Fellow-creatures deserve proportionable Esteem; the infinite Perfections of our Creator demand the highest possible Veneration. If we owe them Gratitude for the Kindnesses, which they do us; we owe beyond Comparison more to him, from whose Bounty every Object and every Capacity of Enjoyment is derived. If our earthly Superiors are intitled to Respect and Submission; the King and Lord of all hath an unspeakably stronger Claim, that we should pay him the profoundest Homage, believe his Instructions, and do his Will without Reserve, however notified; be

absolutely resigned to his Disposol, trust in his Care, and live as being always in his Presence. If lastly, when we have misbehaved to a Man like ourselves, we are humbly to acknowledge it, and condescend to every reasonable Condition of Pardon ; surely, when we have sinned against our heavenly Father, we are bound to the deepest Self-condemnation, the most penitent Confession, the readiest Compliance with whatever Method, he, who alone can judge of the proper one, shall prescribe for our Reconciliation.

Plainly therefore a religious and Christian Behaviour is equally necessary with a moral one : and there can neither be Religion without feeling and expressing Reverence to God ; nor Christianity without believing the Doctrines and observing the Institutions of Christ. Nor did St. *James* imagine there could. On the contrary, we find him enjoining Faith and Prayer, giving Directions about public Worship, and ascribing great Efficacy to the private Ministrations of the Elders of the Church. Nay, in the very Text, far from excluding a Spirit of Piety, he supposes the good Deeds, which he specifies, to be done with a View of appearing *pure and undefiled before God and the Father*. The Persons, to whom he wrote, had

no Doubt, whether Christ had commanded them to be religious : but they understood not fully, wherein Religion consisted. Therefore knowing that they wanted comparatively but little Incitement to the speculative and devotional Parts ; he insists on the other Duties, in which they were deficient : Kindness to their Brethren, and virtuous Restraint of themselves. Thus he completes the Scheme of Christianity, in in perfect Harmony with that, which St. *Paul* hath elsewhere given, by adding to the Obligations of a *godly* Life, those of a *righteous* and *sober* one ^c.

To set his Doctrine before you in a still clearer Light, I shall proceed to shew

I. What *visiting the Fatherless and Widows in their Affliction* implies.

II. What *keeping ourselves unspotted from the World* comprehends.

III. That these two Things are principal Parts of *pure and undefiled Religion*.

I. What *visiting the Fatherless and Widows in their Affliction* implies.

Now, in Scripture Language, to *visit* any one is to take such Notice of him, and treat him in such Manner, as his Condition requires.

^c Tit. ii. 12.

For as Inattention and Neglect are expressed by shutting the Eyes, or turning them from any one; so Attention and Regard, whether in order to punish or to shew Favour, are denoted by opening the Eyes, and turning them towards him; which, in our Translation is often called *visiting*: a Word originally of the same Import with frequently looking upon, and contemplating. For seeing and knowing any Case, in Man ought to be, and in God is always, connected with acting suitably to it. *The Day of his Visitation* therefore, when wicked Persons or Nations are the Subject, is the Day of his Vengeance^d: but that *the Lord hath visited and redeemed his People*, is the highest Expression of his Love^e. And in one Passage of holy Writ, these different Senses of the Word are found together in a beautiful Opposition. *Thus saith the Lord God of Israel against the Pastors, that feed my People: Ye have scattered my Flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the Evil of your Doings, saith the Lord^f.* Since therefore the proper Notice, to be taken of Persons in Distress, is to give them all the Comfort and Relief, that we can; this is what *visiting* signifies in the Text: as it doth also in our Saviour's

^d If. x. 3.^e Luke i. 68.^f Jer. xxiii. 2.

future Speech to those on his right Hand : *I was sick, and ye visited me* §.

To *visit* thus *the Fatherless and Widows* is, in common Acceptation, a Work, not of Justice but of Compassion : so that St. *James* differs in Phrase from St. *Paul*; according to whom the second great Duty of Religion is Righteousness. But as Righteousness there undoubtedly includes Mercy ; which indeed is but Equity to our Fellow-creatures, and strict Justice to God, who hath intrusted us with the Care of them : so Mercy here must include Righteousness ; without which it cannot be real and consistent. There are indeed Persons, who shew, and perhaps affect to shew, great Humanity in some Things, without Honesty of Heart in others. One Sort pique themselves on their Tenderness and Bounty, constant or occasional, to those whom they happen to like : another, on their Charity, to the Poor, or Sympathy with the Distressed, in general : a third, on their Affability and obliging Deportment to all the World. But still, on some Occasions, they will be oppressive or fraudulent, corrupt or prejudiced, cruel or negligent. Now with Men, at least with the Injudicious and Inconfi-

§ Matth. xxv. 36.

derate, who make up a numerous Body, such partial Virtue may often take. But God expects universal Rightness of Disposition and Behaviour: and our own Consciences, in every serious Hour, will reproach us, if we fail in any Branch. A Conduct in some Points beneficent, in others injurious, must of Necessity be less useful to Mankind than it ought: and for the most Part, if not always, will be hurtful on the Whole, both by its immediate Effects, and the bad Influence of its Example.

First therefore the Foundation of Justice must be laid; and then the beautiful Superstructure of Mercy will stand firm: which every one to his Power should be industrious in raising. For the State of the World very loudly demands, that we not only abstain from doing Harm to each other, but do every Kind of Good, that we possibly can. St. *James* indeed hath mentioned but one, *visiting the Widows and Fatherless in their Affliction*. But our Saviour adds more Acts of Compassion, concerning which Inquiry will be made at the last Day: and though he seems to speak as if these alone would determine our final State; yet he speaks in the same Manner, of other Virtues, in his Sermon on the Mount. And not only this, but the whole

Tenour

Tenour of Scripture proves, that every Virtue must be practised; though frequently future Happiness is promised to a single one: under which, in that Case, all the rest, especially of the same Sort, are meant to be comprehended. For as they flow from the same Principle, and are naturally connected, they are not supposed to be unnaturally disjoined. Thus in some Places the Love, in others the Fear, or even the Belief alone, of God, is put for the Whole of Religion; just as Kindness to afflicted Orphans and Widows is put here for the Whole of Benevolence.

Nor indeed was it easy, if possible, to have pitched on a more proper Specimen. Virtuous Actions are laudable only so far as they proceed from virtuous Motives. Now some Parts of kind Behaviour may be intended merely to procure a Return of the same: as Complaisance and Courtesy. Others may be artful Contrivances to promote our own more important worldly Interests: as the Multitude of Services, great and small, which Men are so officious in doing their Superiors. And the Vanity of raising a high Character may produce not a few: indeed all that lie open to publick Observation. But comforting and assisting the afflicted and helpless
Poor,

Poor, is a melancholy, troublesome, expensive Work: and if performed with the Privacy, needful to acquit it from the Censure of Ostentation, attracts but little of the World's Regard, which is commonly fixed on Objects widely different. This Instance therefore was chosen by our Apostle with the utmost Prudence, to remind Men, that the only genuine Beneficence is that, which extends, as Opportunity offers, to the least inviting Cases.

Our Saviour himself gave a Rule of the same Tendency, when, at a large Feast, *he said to him, that bade him; When thou makest a Dinner or a Supper, call not thy Friends, nor thy Brethren, neither thy Kinsmen, nor rich Neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a Recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a Feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind; and thou shalt be blessed. For they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the Resurrection of the Just*^h. His Meaning was not, to forbid any of the Proprieties or Civilities of Life: much less to enjoin a perverse Affectation of contradicting them. Neither his Doctrine, nor his Temper, were of this Turn. On the contrary, he wrought a Miracle once, to enable the Master of a Family to en-

^h Luke xiv. 12,—14.

ertain his Guests more plentifully ¹. But the Custom of the *Jewish* Language, in comparing two Things, is seemingly to prohibit that, which is only designed to be represented as the less valuable. Thus in the Old Testament God saith, *I will have Mercy, and not Sacrifice* ^k; that is, I esteem it more than Sacrifice. Here then, in the same Manner, our Blessed Lord means to prefer Charity to the Poor, before Hospitality and Generosity to such as need it not: and under this one Example to intimate a general Caution, that we should not content ourselves with the Performance of the more pleasing Offices of Society; (because our Inducements to these may be doubtful) but prove to others and our own Minds, that our Goodness is real and universal, by a more than ordinary Care to fulfil those Obligations, which we should naturally be most inclined to omit. And as these are not the same in all Men; but some are aptest to fail in one Expression of Humanity, and some in another; we ought none of us to consider any single Branch, however excellent, as if it were the Whole: but each to think over the several Particulars, be they of more or less Moment, in which he can add to the Satisfaction, or diminish the Uneasiness of

¹ John ii. 1, &c.^k Hof. vi. 6. Matth. ix. 13.

his Fellow-creatures: that so, by exerting a Benevolence, not lavished promiscuously, but proportioned with Judgment, to every Person within the Sphere of his Influence, he may, in this Part of his Duty, *be perfect and entire, wanting nothing* ¹.

Usually indeed the Rich and Great can do Good by far the most effectually and extensively. But others also, by Dutifulness or Affection shewn in the nearer Relations of Life, by virtuous Example, Advice prudently given, seasonable Assistance, deserved Recommendation, faithful Service, compassionate Sympathy, obliging Notice, innocent Cheerfulness, and even common good Humour, may be Instruments, of much more Comfort and Satisfaction to all around them, than is generally imagined.

But I now proceed to shew you

II. What *keeping ourselves unspotted from the World* comprehends.

And in general it means, preserving our Lives and our Hearts free from those Vices, to which either the natural Impressions of sensible Objects, or the additional Force given them by prevailing Custom, may expose us. Now these are of different Sorts. We may learn from the

¹ James i. 4.

World Selfishness, Envy, Resentment. But these interfere so continually both with Justice and Humanity, that in Effect you have been cautioned against them under the former Head. We may also learn Pride: a Sin, which taints the Mind of Man beyond most things: not only renders him disagreeable and injurious, and prevents his making Reparation, though sensible that he owes it; but keeps him from perceiving his Faults and his Follies, and tempts him to think that Application even to God for Pardon and Assistance is beneath him. Yet with this dreadful Spirit our Nature is so deeply infected, and we strengthen one another so much in it by our Behaviour, that it requires, both a strict Search to find how far we are guilty of it, and uncommon Care to root it out.

But the most prevailing Defilement of the World is immoderate Love of Pleasure: a Disposition of worse Consequence, as Multitudes profess not to see the Harm of it. For they conceive such exceedingly high Opinions of the Merit of good Nature, and their own Share in this Merit, that they are perfectly indifferent about every thing else, and violate the plainest Rules of Sobriety and Chastity without Scruple. Yet such Men will appear, when the Matter is examined

amined, extremely deficient in the very Point, on which they rest their Character. For they always grieve and afflict their Friends; they frequently wrong, in various Ways, those, whose Happiness they were bound, and perhaps had engaged, principally to consult; they entice others into Sin, and leave them afterwards exposed to Wretchedness; they introduce Diffusions and Dishonour into Families, they disorder and weaken human Society. And the Wrongness of their Conduct is so evident, that they are usually forced by a Variety of Arts to banish Reflexion; that they may, if possible, be ignorant of their own Guilt, or at least inattentive to it. For would they but consider at all seriously, and without palliating, what unkind and cruel things they do, what good and worthy Actions their Course of Life obliges them to omit, and how strongly their Example tends to make others perhaps worse than themselves; they could not fail to see, that whatever Pretences, and sometimes plausible ones, there may be to the contrary, no two things upon Earth are in Reality more inconsistent, than good Nature and Debauchery.

Indeed great Numbers will acknowledge this; who yet strenuously plead, that provided

they

they do nothing prejudicial to others, there can be no Harm in diverting and delighting themselves to the utmost in whatever suits their Fancy. But besides the prudential Objections to this Scheme, it ought surely to be observed, that in Point of Duty we are bound to live and act agreeably to the Nature given us. If Passions and Appetites had been the Whole of our inward Frame, we might allowably have indulged them to the full, like the rest of our Fellow-brutes. If being also blest with Reason, we were taught nothing more by it, than to abstain from hurting each other; so long as we observed that Caution, it could not condemn us. But we feel ourselves qualified for better and worthier Occupations, than the most innocent Indulgences of Sense. We experience a higher Order of Affections, endued with a rightful Authority over the rest. These it is our Business to cultivate here, in order to reap the Fruit of them for ever hereafter. And all Attachments to worldly Objects, which make us overlook the Worth, and neglect the Improvement of our own Souls, though they were not in the least injurious to others, are improper and criminal Debasements of ourselves. Be they vehement Pursuits or light Amusements,

ments, groffer Pleasures or more refined ones; that we should live to them, and fill up our Time and our Thoughts with them, as Multitudes commonly do, is altogether unsuitable to Creatures evidently formed for Attentions and Impressions of another Sort, rational, moral, religious. And though our present Situation upon Earth subjects us to many low Employments, and offers to us many low Gratifications, neither of which we are to disdain, since they are appointed for us; yet we must habituate ourselves to a Superiority over them, by fit Exercises of Self-denial; and both consider and use them, only as being subservient to nobler Purposes; ever fixing our chief Regard on the Duties of Life, the State of our own Hearts, the Relation which we bear to God, the spiritual and eternal Bliss, for which he designs us. Else, far from being *unspotted by this World*, we shall be so immersed in it, as not to be *meet for the Inheritance of the Saints in Light* ^m.

Accordingly the Scripture, which, coming from him, who best knows what is good for us, ought surely to be obeyed, were it ever so implicitly, both restrains our sensual Enjoyments

^m Col. i. 12.

within certain Limits, and requires a great Disengagement from the most allowable of earthly Satisfaction and Advantages, that we may have Room in our Breast, for purer Joys. Our Lord himself hath told us; *No Man can serve two Masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon*^a. And his Apostles have enjoined us, *Set your Affections on Things above, not on Things on the Earth*^o. *Love not the World, neither the Things that are in the World. If any Man love the World, the Love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the World, the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eyes, and the Pride of Life, is not of the Father*^p. That is; immoderate Fondness for the Pleasures of Sense, unreasonable Delight in beholding the Increase of our Wealth, haughty Complacency in Pre-eminence and Power, are not Dispositions proceeding from God, nor consistent with a Spirit of true Religion. We cannot indeed preserve ourselves from being solicited, perhaps from being moved and disquieted, by some or other of the Temptations that surround us: but from

^a Matth. vi. 24.^o Col. iii. 2.^p 1 John ii. 15, 16.

yielding to them, through Divine Assistance, we may.

Nor is it necessary for this Purpose, either to retire out of Society, or live uncomfortably in it. The Duties of our Stations and several Professions we must faithfully perform, as Part of the Service, which we owe to God, for he will accept the commonest Labour as such, if it flows from that Principle. The natural Grati-fications, which he hath provided for us, are neither unthankfully to be condemned, nor beyond Reason suspected, as unsafe. And they, who run into such Extremities, make Religion appear uninviting to others, and lay a heavier Burthen on themselves, than they will be able to bear, at least without souring their Tem-pers: a grievous Fault; and in that Case the less excusable, as it is of their own bringing on, by going out of their Way: whereas going forward in it would have intitled them both to surer Protection and easier Pardon.

But still over-free Indulgence is much more general, and usually more hazardous, than over-strict Abstinence. And all Persons, especially all who enter far into the World, should frequently and impartially examine, whether they are indeed so innocent, as they are apt to
imagine;

Imagine ; whether they are not growing vain and thoughtless, languid in their Sentiments of true Honour and Virtue, infrequent or spiritless in their Devotions, unmindful of past Sins and future Improvements, forgetful of their latter End. And proportionably as they discover any of these bad Symptoms, they should *take* most serious *Heed to themselves, lest their Hearts be overcharged with the Cares, the Pursuits, the Diversions, of this Life ; and so that Day come upon them unawares* ⁹.

Let us all therefore determine, neither to fly from such Trials of our Virtue, as Providence hath designed to strengthen and perfect it ; nor yet run or be led into such, as may probably overset it : but use the Good and bear the Evil of this World with Moderation ; and prepare for the Rewards of the next with Diligence.

Having thus explained the two comprehensive Duties of Benevolence and Self-government, prescribed in the Text, I come now to shew

III. That they are principal Parts of *pure and undefiled Religion*.

Indeed without them there can be nothing, that deserves the Name. Religion is not a

⁹ Luke xxi. 34.

System of speculative Opinions, nor a Ritual of Forms and Ceremonies: but it consists in that Love to God, as a Being perfectly holy in himself and good to us; and that Dutifulness to him, as the Author and Ruler of the Universe; which engage Men to seek his Favour by imitating his Nature and obeying his Laws. If then we neither become such as he is, nor do such Things as he commands, what Pretence have we to call ourselves pious Persons? “*We believe in him.*” And so do *the Devils*! “*We worship him.*” But utterly *in vain*! while we continue to be, what he must for ever continue to hate; unkind to our Fellow-creatures or immoral in the Conduct of ourselves. Indeed what Desire can we have of the Reward, which he promises, heavenly Happiness; when the Temper, necessary to qualify us for enjoying it, is directly contrary to that, which we indulge? But a Person humane in his Heart, and careful in the Government of his Appetites and Passions cannot, ordinarily speaking, be *far from the Kingdom of God*! He hath no worldly Motive to prejudice him against Religion: but all imaginable Reasons to

* James ii. 19.

* Matth. xv. 9.

* Mark xii. 34.

hope and believe it is true. His Knowledge of what is right and fit will help to give him just Conceptions of God: his Esteem for it will teach him to honour God: and the Sense, which he must have, of his many Failures in it, will powerfully tend to make him humble and penitent, solicitous for Pardon and Assistance, in what Manner soever bestowed; and ambitious of that blessed State, where he shall sin no more, but his weak Habits of Goodness will attain their Maturity and bring forth their Fruit in Perfection.

Thus do virtuous Dispositions conduct Men to Religion: and in return, one main Business of Religion is to strengthen and improve virtuous Dispositions. Doubtless the Love of God is *the first and great Commandment*^u: but the Love of our Neighbour, and of inward Holiness, are the principal Evidences, which he requires, of our loving him^w. Doubtless he is to be most reverently worshipped; and every Duty, which he hath enjoined, whether by Reason or by Scripture alone, most conscientiously performed: all Comparisons of one Sort with the other, which may contribute to depreciate either, must be carefully avoided; and

^u Matth. xxii. 38.^w 1 John v. 3.

the inexpressible good Influence of merely Christian Precepts on the Observance of all the rest, thankfully acknowledged, But still, moral Obligations are by much the most numerous and extensive: the Temptations, that we have to transgress them, are much the strongest: the Good, which fulfilling them doth to Mankind, is much the most considerable: the Proof, which it gives, of our Advancement in Piety, is much the surest. And they are completely comprehended under the two Heads, mentioned in the Text, Good-will to others, and due Regulation of ourselves: one of which includes all the Exertions of Virtue; the other, all the Restraints of it.

If indeed we practise ever so many of both, only from Regard to Interest or Ease, Fondness for Applause, Fear of worldly Punishment or Disesteem; securing these Points will be our whole Recompence. If we do it from a Sense of Duty; that Sense is very defective, whilst Duty to God is left out of the Consideration. Nay, if our principal End be Obedience to him, and we flatter ourselves that our Obedience is meritorious or faultless; our Pride will convert the pretended Homage into an Insult. But if we faithfully endeavour to perform every moral
Precept,

Precept, as the Law of our Creator; not trusting to our own Strength, but devoutly using the appointed Means for obtaining the Aid of the holy Spirit; and then with Humility of Heart offer up to our Heavenly Father all that we do, as *our reasonable Service* ^x; but unworthy of his Acceptance, otherwise than through his Mercy, promised to the Mediation of our Blessed Lord: this will be the fullest Demonstration, and the only effectual one, that we can give of *pure Religion and undefiled*. Scripture teaches it: our Understandings acquiesce in it: the Experience of the great Day will verify it: and the Ministers of the Gospel are expressly required to publish the Notice of it beforehand. *This is a faithful Saying, and these Things I will that thou affirm constantly: that they, which have believed in God, may be careful to maintain good Works* ^y.

^x Rom. xii. 1.^y Tit. iii. 8.

THE HISTORY OF THE

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CHARLES THE FIRST

BY

JOHN BURNET

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

IN TWO VOLUMES

LONDON

Printed by J. Streater, at the Sign of the Gun, in St. Dunstons Church-yard

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S E R M O N VII.

2 T I M. iii. 5.

Having a Form of Godliness, but denying the Power thereof: from such turn away.

TH E S E Words conclude a most dreadful Description given by St. *Paul* of the State of Mankind *in the last Days*. Having foretold the general Practice of almost every Sin, that could be named, he surprisngly adds, that with all these they should retain a mighty Pretence of acting from Principle: *having a Form of Godliness, but denying the Power thereof*. But how unaccountable soever this may seem in Speculation, it is common in Fact. And we shall do well to enquire, both into the Original and the Extent of such Behaviour. For though Remarks have been made upon some Instances of it with sufficient Severity, little
Attention

Attention hath been paid to others of almost equal Importance : and yet we are charged to *turn away from* all who are guilty of them, as blamable and dangerous Persons.

The Duty of Man, though proceeding all from one Source, naturally divides itself into Religion and Morals. Our Understanding and our Affections dictate to us the Practice of both these : and both evidently promote our Happiness. But they promote it by such Exercises and Restraints, as the inbred Disorder of our Frame makes uneasy, at the same Time that it makes them necessary : and that injudicious Tenderneſs for ourselves, to which weak Minds, as well as Bodies are liable, creates in us a strange Averſion from entering upon a Courſe, imagined to be ſtill harſher than it is, though eſſential to our Welfare. Yet avowedly to diſregard the Obligations they are under, would be too bold a Step for moſt Men ; who muſt therefore find out ſome middle Way. And one ſuch Way, a very obvious one, is Diſſimulation : of which accordingly great Uſe hath been made, to preſerve a Shew both of Piety and Virtue. But while juſt Notions of either prevail amongſt Men, it will uſually coſt Hypocrites more Pains to gain Credit, than would be needful to become

come in earnest good: and after all, they but seldom fail of being seen through by others, and yet seldomer satisfy themselves. Mere Pretence therefore will not answer the Purpose: there must be something that hath the Look, even to our own Minds, of Reality; some Counterfeit of our Duty, substituted instead of it, which we can mistake for it. Were such Mistakes involuntary, they would be guiltless: but the Persons deceived in this Case, choose to deceive themselves; which the vicious are both prone and able to do in a wonderful Degree. Thus the voluptuous Man takes up with present momentary Gratifications for his real proper Happiness: and the artful Man looks on the Cunning, that only serves a short-lived Turn, as genuine Wisdom.

Now in just the same Manner Men have contrived to set up for Religion, some, one Thing, some another: all which, though exceeding various, go under the general Name of Superstition. And several of these Corruptions might have their first Rise merely from Error in Judgment or Ignorance. But then ill Design must have supported afterwards what otherwise good Sense would easily have corrected: and the main Cause, why Men had false Notions of God
and

and his Worship, was, that, as the Apostle observes, *they did not like to retain the true in their Knowledge*^a. It may seem an Objection to this, that superstitious Observances are often far more burthensome, than *our reasonable Service*^b. But an evil Heart thinks no Grievance so heavy, as the Exertion of good, and the Mortification of sinful Dispositions: besides that Ways have been invented of lightening the other Burthens, and reducing them commonly to a small Matter. No Wonder then, that in all Ages *Forms of Godliness without the Power* took place: and being greatly diversified, as different Occasions invited, have not only stood in the Room of all that affectionate Reverence, which Men owe to God, but have often been supposed to compensate for breaking the strongest of those Ties, which bind them one to another. And thus to their Comfort, they found themselves at Liberty, in a great Measure, to be at once in Favour with Heaven, and wicked.

Yet still there was remaining in their Breasts a Sense of Right and Wrong in their Behaviour towards their Fellow-creatures, which the grossest Perversions of Religion could not quite

^a Rom. i. 28.^b Rom. xii. 1.

extinguish;

extinguish; but it would from Time to Time break out, and be troublesome. They could not therefore be completely easy, till this was quieted also: which accordingly they attempted by the same Method that was used in the former Case; debasing, as there the natural Awe of God, so here the natural Approbation of virtuous Conduct, into a spurious Imitation of it. Good Minds esteem themselves, and labour to be esteemed by others, for acting an innocent and useful, and, if need be, a self-denying Part in the Community of Mankind. But bad ones, unwilling to purchase the Applause of the World and their own so dear, dress themselves up in false Jewels, formed artfully to resemble the true; are so dazzled and cheated with the Blaze of these, that they overlook the inward Deformities covered by them, and demand more Respect from all around them, as Persons of Distinction and Merit, than the most truly valuable Man upon Earth doth: for he knows his Imperfections, and *who hath made him to differ* ^c.

Thus then the Form without the Power, though much oftener censured in Religion, is perhaps as frequent, and as mischievous in Morality. Some have corrupted the former

^c 1 Cor. iv. 7.

with injurious Notions of God, with absurd Modes of honouring him, with Schemes of being pious, consistent with living impiously. And others in like Manner have corrupted the latter with chimerical Imaginations, with pernicious Rules of Life, with vain Contrivances to be Men of Worth, notwithstanding a Conduct in many Instances notoriously unworthy. And these Depravations correspond entirely the one to the other. Only the Substitutes for true Religion, though widely different, are most, if not all of them, comprehended under the Term Superstition; by which Name they have been plentifully exposed: and the Substitutes for true Morals not having been collected into a Body, with a general Denomination affixed to them, the Abuses introduced by their Means have escaped with slighter Notice. The most extensive Word for them perhaps is, false Honour; which therefore, as I proceed, I shall commonly use in speaking of them: yet it by no Means includes the whole; for false Good-nature, a different thing, is perpetually cried up, to serve just the same Purpose. But however impossible it may be to find an adequate Expression, the Fact is clear; that Counterfeits

of Virtue, as well as Piety, have been fought out, with a bad Design, and too successfully.

These, in some Breasts, dwell together amicably : either so adapted to each other, as to join in approving the same Actions ; or governing by Turns when they differ, and dividing Life between them : in which last Case, if what calls itself Religion chance to be offended by any enormous Piece of Iniquity, some Sacrifice is made to it, in Acknowledgment of its superior Right ; and after it is thus appeased, all goes on as before, through the gay and flourishing Part of Mens Days at least. But some Persons on the contrary, impatient after a while under the least Restraints from it, throw it off entirely, and profess Honour alone for their Rule ; on the Dignity of which valuing themselves beyond Measure, they not only laugh at Superstition with very superior Airs, but depreciate all Regard to God, as no better than Superstition. Now as it would be very unjust for a Man of good Morals to despise Religion ; because these two Systems are not only both true, but indeed the same Truth : so it is quite ridiculous for the Man of mere Honour to despise Superstition ; because these two are not only both false, but in Effect the same Falsehood. They both proceed,

ceed, as you have seen already, from the same Unfairness and Inconsiderateness : and if we go on to examine their Features more distinctly, we shall see the Nearness of their Relation still more fully : it will appear that each depraves equally a natural and good Principle in the Heart ; that in each the Depravation is brought about, by first exalting too highly some one or few Things, to the Disparagement of others of no less Merit, and then carrying the favourite Point so far, as turns it quickly into Folly, and soon after into Wickedness ; yet all under Colour of acting from the noblest Motives imaginable. These Things I shall endeavour to prove and apply.

That each is the Depravation of an originally right Principle in our Hearts appears undeniably. Were not the Reverence of an invisible Superior founded in Nature, it could neither have prevailed so universally, nor stood its Ground so firmly, against all the Sophistry, with which Unbelievers have attacked it, and under all that Load of Absurdities, which Bigots have heaped upon it. Again : were there not something essentially honourable and worthy, visionary Ideas of Worth and Honour could not have obtained and supported themselves amongst Men. So that indeed the very Abuses, which are ob-

jected

jected to Religion and Virtue, will, if duly considered, amount to Proofs of them. No Error can take deep Root and spread far, without assuming a Likeness to some Truth, from which it seems to spring. And the primitive Likeness must be a pretty strong one: but after a while, the Likeness of that Likeness may take its Place, and by Degrees all be changed into a contrary Appearance: just as by fetching a large Compass Persons may seem to walk straight forward, till their Faces are turned the opposite Way.

The first Step of this Progress is usually fixing the Thoughts and Affections very intensely upon some one Part of Duty. And this, Men argue, is being concerned for what they ought. But if this engage us too much, other Objects, intitled to our Attention, must go without their due Share, even were we desirous they should have it. But if we had rather forget them, and make Amends for it by paying a double Regard to what we like better, there are no Degrees of Neglect to which we may not thus run. Every one observes, that in Religion Men set their whole Hearts on some darling Speculation or Practice, and utterly overlook whatever else they please. Now just the same Thing

happens in Morals ; and several of the Instances coincide. As there are some, who place their religious Character in performing certain Rites and keeping certain Rules of outward Sanctity, without the least Concern about any such Temper and Conduct, as those Rites and Rules were designed to express and promote : so do others put their moral Character, if it may be called such, on little external Proprieties and Decencies of Behaviour, which they would on no Account violate, yet have no Scruple of trampling upon the most important social Obligations ; will be guilty of the greatest Injustice, but not for the World commit an Incivility ; and while in some Cases they most rigidly observe the nicest Punctilios, will in others disguise the vilest Perfidiousness with the meanest Hypocrisy. Again: the whole Piety of many lies in a vehement Zeal to have such Things publicly professed, as either they do not believe, or at least will not practise: and the whole Virtue of others consists in extravagant Talk, meant to propagate high Notions of Rectitude and intellectual Beauty, and harmonious Affections, which have scarce the least Influence on them beyond Words. Again: some have narrowed their Christian Charity almost into the single Act of Almsgiving to the Poor,

on

on the Strength of which they will venture, not only to be uncharitable in many Ways to whomsoever else they will, but possibly dishonest, intemperate, dissolute besides. And others have shrunk their boasted Benevolence into a partial Good-nature, arbitrarily exerted or with-held, and shewn chiefly perhaps on Occasions very ill chosen; from which they claim Allowance to be as inhumanly barbarous in other Cases as they please, and as profane and debauched as they can. In short, Men turn their Pretences to Morals into almost nothing, just as they do their Pretences to Religion: and in both they proceed, sometimes by Fashion and Custom, sometimes by mere Inclination or Humour. To some Things they adhere firmly without any Reason, others they slight contemptuously, though grounded on the strongest Reasons. And thus, on both Sides, Attachment to Truth and Duty is gradually effaced: till, as the one Sort can be very pious with as little true Religion, as they think proper; so the other can be Persons of Honour, with a very small Share of any single good Quality. Indeed it is pitiable to see what wretched poor Remnants of Principle such Men have at last to pride themselves upon, and dignify with pompous Names.

Nor do both Sorts agree only in this first Step, of exalting some favourite Article to the undue Depression of others, but in the second, of carrying it to such Lengths, as turn it into Folly, and afterwards into Wickedness.

For as Superstition presses the Obligation of many Things further than Religion requires; so doth false Honour, beyond the Precepts of Morality: and strange Refinements are adopted, by the one in the Service of God, and by the other in the Intercourses of common Life, which neither divine nor human Wisdom can possibly approve. But further: as Superstition sometimes obliges Men to transgress the Rules of Virtue; so doth false Honour very frequently oblige them to transgress the Rules of Religion. And indeed the superstitious Man, to do him Justice, though he is very apt to look down upon Morality as a low Attainment, yet in general doth think it one of some Value: but the mere Man of Honour takes Religion to be downright Meanness; and at the same Time that he will pay the most servile Court to an earthly Superior, thinks all Expressions of Duty to the Lord and King of Heaven and Earth much beneath him: or though inwardly he thinks otherwise, yet the cowardly Fear of making

making an ill Figure amongst his Brethren drives him to the absurd Bravery of daring to affront God, though it be with a guilty Conscience, and an aching Heart. Further : as the superstitious Man holds those in Contempt who observe only the common Rules of Piety ; so doth the Man of false Honour those who confine themselves to the common Rules of Virtue. And as the Extravagances of the one make Religion despised, and tempt Men to run into Profaneness ; so do the Wildnesses of the other make Virtue laughed at, and tempt Men to run into Profligacy. If Superstition contradicts, and then to screen itself, undervalues Reason : still the fiercest Bigot, or most frantic Enthusiast, cannot have less Regard to Reason, or more absolutely refuse to be tried by it, than the Man of false Honour. Nor can the former pay a more irrational Worship to his Deity, than the other pays, and requires that every Body else should pay, to himself. Further yet : Men of Religion and Virtue are humble and diffident, candid and mild : but Devotees to the Shadow of each, are always haughty and positive, suspicious and ready to take Offence. And when they do take Offence, the hottest Zealot cannot easily be more mischievous in God's Cause, than

the Man of Honour thinks himself bound to be in his own. If the Religion, that torments and sheds Blood to propagate Faith, be cruel and detestable; the Honour, that ravages and depopulates Nations to extend Glory, deserves no softer Epithets. If Superstition, on small Pretences, enlists Men into Parties, bitter against one another, and hurtful to Society; false Honour, on Grounds as inconsiderable, raises Factions equally pernicious; and exacts the same Perseverance in adhering to, and going every Length with, the Side once chosen, whatever Risque the whole may run by it. If Superstition in some Cases teaches Men to stick at no Wickedness, under Penalty of losing God's Favour; so doth false Honour in others, under that of forfeiting the Esteem of what is called the World. And if the former gives Men Hopes of escaping the Anger of Heaven for many known Sins by Zeal for some imagined Duty; the latter helps them to evade the Condemnation of their own Hearts for many base Actions, by encouraging them to pique themselves on some one Point of Merit, which perhaps after all hath little or no Merit in it. And thus, as, under the Influence of Superstition, all Sense of true Religion fades away; so doth all Sense of

true

true Virtue under that of mere Honour: till at last the Meaning of this big Word is become so little, that a Man shall claim, and be allowed, a Title to it, with ever so few good Qualities, and ever so many bad ones; provided he dares but venture his Life to be revenged of those who shall ascribe to him any of the latter Sort, which he doth not care to acknowledge.

The vilest Superstition cannot possibly have depraved the Heart more, than such Honour: nor usually are its ill Impressions so hard to change for better. And therefore though a State of corrupt Religion be doubtless a deplorable one; yet that is still worse, and more immediately bordering upon Ruin, when all Reverence for God being avowedly renounced, and all Concern for Virtue in Reality extinguished, the single Direction left for human Behaviour, the only Principle professed to keep Men from being abandoned throughout, is an airy Notion, which will easily assume any Shape to serve any Purpose, that they please; or vanish at Command, when it can serve none. It should be added, that as Superstition is a much wickeder Thing, for corrupting Religion under Pretence of highly respecting it; so is false Honour, for corrupting Morals under the Colour of re-

fining and exalting them. And the latter Corruptions are the less excusable of the two, as they can hardly in so great a Degree proceed from Mistake: since the Duties, that we owe one to another must be considerably more obvious to our Apprehensions, than such as flow from the Relations in which we stand to our heavenly Father, his Son and holy Spirit.

Upon the whole, I hope it is evident, that these two Characters are in many Particulars directly alike: that where they are opposite, they have this Likeness still, that one is as far removed from Truth as the other: but that in the Point before us they perpetually agree: that is, in being specious *Forms* and Appearances of the two most valuable Things in the World, without having *the Power* and Substance of either; in obscuring by this fallacious Resemblance that Knowledge of their Duty, which by Reason and Revelation God hath given to Men, and making *the Light that is in them Darkness* ^d.

Yet, notwithstanding all that hath been said, I must beg you to observe, that both Superstition may be so spoken against as to depreciate Piety; and Honour so as to depreciate Virtue. What many delight to repeat, as a Maxim with-

^d Mat. vi. 23.

out Exception, that Superstition is worse than having no Religion at all, may be true in some Cases: just as it may in others, that false Honour is worse than having no Rule of Conduct. But since either of these may prevail in a very small and nearly harmless Degree, or in a great and pernicious one; to conclude the highest and the lowest under the same Condemnation, and make him who doth no worse than load the Foundation of Truth with a few ungraceful Superstructures, equally guilty with such as would overturn it, is either the grossest Unfairness, or the most pitiable Want of Judgment. Religion and Virtue naturally produce the happiest Effects. Erroneous Notions in either tend, always to weaken those Effects, often to produce the contrary: and therefore it should be the constant Business of wise and good Men to weed them out of human Minds; but with the utmost Caution; *lest while the Tares are gathered, the Wheat also be rooted up with them*. And they, who manifest no Feeling of this Danger, have either a worse Intention than they own, or a Zeal guided by very little Prudence.

Therefore the Use to be made of this Discourse is, not that the Enormities of superstitious Men

^c Matth. xiii. 29.

should

should bring Piety into Disgrace, or those of the Votaries of false Honour make true Honour deemed a Phantom; not that either of these defective and faulty Characters should keep themselves in Countenance by inveighing against the Defects and Faults of the other; but that both labour seriously to supply and correct their own, and so become such in Deed, as they are now only in Imagination. For if our Maker demand any Obedience from his rational Creatures, it must be paid to his whole Will, however made known: and if we are under any Ties of social Behaviour or Self-government, we are bound to whatever is just and fit. All genuine Religion leads to Virtue: all genuine Virtue to Religion: *What therefore God hath joined together, let not Man put asunder*^r: but let all unite in the Practice of both, as prescribed in the Gospel. For there and there only they will find, (what strongly demonstrates its heavenly Origin) a blameless and perfect Institution of Duty, without any Mixture of what is wrong, or any Omission of what is right. *Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable Gift*^s.

^r Matth. xix. 6. Mark x. 9.^s 2 Cor. ix. 15.

S E R M O N V I I I ,

G A L . iv. 4.

*When the Fulness of the Time was come, God
sent forth his Son.*

THE Redemption of Mankind from Sin and Misery by the Incarnation and Death of Christ was, on God's Part, entirely a Matter of mere Grace and Favour. It depended wholly on his free Choice, whether he would send a Saviour into the World at all: much more at what Time he would do it. We have therefore no Claim, but what is founded on his voluntary Promises. These indeed, when they were given, he was bound to make good. And as some of them not only assured the World of such a Person's coming, but fixed the Time of it; so accordingly he came at the Time fixed. It had been foretold
in

in Scripture, that he should appear under the fourth of the great Empires of the World^a; whilst the second House, or Temple of the Jews was in being^b; when *the Sceptre was departing from Judah*; at the End of so many Weeks after their Return from the Captivity^d, each consisting, not of seven Days, but of seven Years. And in Fact, just when all these Marks were visibly united, *Jesus came into Galilee, preaching and saying, The Time is fulfilled; and the Kingdom of God is at hand: Repent ye, and believe the Gospel*^e.

The Fulness of Time therefore, mentioned by the Apostle in the Text, which he calls *the appointed Time of the Father* two Verses before, is plainly that which the Scripture-prophecies point out and determine. And this being kept to, as it was with great Exactness; reasonable and considerate Men, if the World were made up of such only, would have little farther left to do in the Matter, than to acknowledge, with due Admiration, that *known unto God are all his Works from the Beginning*^f. Still, modest Inquiries may undoubtedly be made, why a Blessing of so great Importance was delayed so

^a Dan. ii. 44.^b Hag. ii. 9.^c Gen. xlix. 10.^d Dan. ix. 25, 26.^e Mark i. 14, 15.^f Acts xv. 18.

long. If Reasons can be found, pious Minds will rejoice in them: if not, they will easily be satisfied, that God can see better and farther, than his Creatures.

* But the captious and the arrogant, they who must either understand every Thing, or will believe nothing, have, it seems, insuperable Difficulties on this Head: and the one Point of our Saviour's coming no sooner, is enough with them to destroy his whole Claim without looking farther into it. For they say, if either his Instructions or his Death, were of such Consequence, as Christians imagine; why was not the World blessed with them immediately? Where was the Goodness, where was the Wisdom, of deferring till 1700 Years ago, what, if it was necessary at all, was equally necessary long before. If their own Reason was a sufficient Guide to Men, there was no Need of his ever coming to teach them: if it was not,

* *Cels. in Orig. l. 6. §. 78. objects: Why so late? Why into such a Corner? He should have animated many Bodies and been sent into different Parts of the World. Origen answers, that he entered before his Incarnation into all that lived well: that he must appear in a Nation owning one God, and having Prophecies of his Coming, and at a Time when his Doctrine could spread*: that one Christ, as one Sun, was enough for the World; and if not, all Christians are Members of his Body.*

* On which Point also he insists l. 2. §. 30. shewing the Advantages of his appearing when the World was in Peace, under one great Empire.

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he ought to have supplied the Defects of it many Ages sooner.

Now to these Objections it would be Answer enough, that God having born Testimony to Christianity, first by Prophecies evidently fulfilled, then by Miracles unquestionably performed; it is a much more conclusive Argument, that for these Reasons, it certainly came from him, and therefore came at a proper Time; than that, according to our Notions, it did not come at a proper Time, and therefore did not come from him. Of plain Facts well attested, and plain Conclusions drawn from them, we are competent Judges. But for Creatures who have only a very imperfect Acquaintance with a very small Part of the World, for a very few Years, to think of prescribing, by what Steps the allwise God must conduct the Affairs of it; and at what Period he is bound to do this Thing and that, if he doth it at all; is such amazing Presumption, as no Degree of ignorant Boldness in deciding about the highest Points of earthly Knowledge, makes any Approach to: and were it carried on to its full Length, it must end in downright Atheism.

For suppose a new Set of Objectors should arise, and argue against the Creation, as these

do against the Redemption, of Man: should ask, if a good and wise Being made the World for our Happiness, why he made it no sooner; why he did not make us at once as happy, as we could be; why at least the Conveniences of Life, the Remedies for Diseases, the several Parts of useful and entertaining Knowledge were not discovered to us immediately; why the extraordinary Persons, who in various Ways have enlightened and benefited the World, were sent into it so late, and not at the very first; where was the Goodness, where was the Wisdom, of deferring so many Things till these later Ages; which, if they were wanted at all, were equally wanted long before: could any other Answer be given in Defence of natural Religion, than hath been given just now in Defence of the Gospel; that God knows best the proper Time of every Thing? Let these Objectors therefore chuse, whether they will stand by their Objection, and be Atheists; or give it up, and be Christians.

But to supply them with some Inducements to chuse right, and give you some further Satisfaction in so material a Point, it will be useful to consider our blessed Lord's Coming,

I. With Regard to those who lived before it; and

II. With Relation to those who lived after it, For thence it will appear, that his Coming, when he did, was no Hardship to the former; and an unspeakable Advantage to the latter: and therefore was well and wisely appointed.

I. That his Coming, when he did, was no Hardship to those, who lived before it. For though his personal Appearance was late, yet that doth not hinder, but the earliest Ages may have been greatly the happier for it. We learn indeed from Scripture, that *there is no Salvation in any other*^h. But we learn also, that the Salvation, procured by him, extends from the Beginning of Time to the End of it: that *as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive*ⁱ: that good Persons in the first Ages, as well as in the following, were redeemed by his Blood, who being foreordained from Eternity, to be *manifested in due Time*^k, is therefore, in Respect of the Efficacy of his Death, *the Lamb slain from the Foundation of the World*^l. The Reality of this Efficacy we hope we are well able to defend, whenever that shall be the Point in Question. But in the mean Time this is very evident, that whatever Motive the View of his

^h Acts iv. 12.ⁱ 1 Cor. xv. 22.^k Tit. i. 2, 3.^l Rev. xiii. 8.

Sufferings, when past, could offer to God for being gracious to Men, the Foresight of the same Sufferings, covenanted for in Time to come, must be an equal Motive: for a good Security is, to all Intents, equivalent to an actual Payment. And therefore the Death of our Saviour, when he did die, was just as beneficial, as it possibly could have been, ever so much earlier. And as we firmly believe that it was highly beneficial to many, who trusted in God's Mercy, with a very obscure Knowledge of him: so we are far from denying, that it may have been beneficial to many others, who trusted in the same Mercy, without any present Knowledge of him at all.

We do indeed maintain, that human Reason, unassisted by divine Revelation, is an insufficient Guide in Matters of Religion. But insufficient for what Purpose? Not insufficient to shew the Means of escaping future Misery. If it were, since Multitudes have never had any other Guide, they must be miserable unavoidably, and God unjust in making them so. But we say it is insufficient, in its very Nature, to give Men that Degree of Knowledge and Goodness, and consequently that future Happiness, which the Faith of Christ can give: and that it

hath proved insufficient in Fact, to give any one Nation of the World any considerable Degree of Knowledge and Goodness at all: nay, to preserve any one Nation from being overwhelmed with gross Ignorance and Wickedness. That the heathen Part of the World hath been thus ignorant and wicked, Unbelievers themselves must acknowledge. And if it be an Argument against the Christian Scheme, that nothing was done sooner to relieve them; how much stronger an Argument is it against *their* Scheme, that, according to that, nothing is yet, or ever will be, done to relieve them? We teach, that God sent his Son to reform the World, when he saw it a proper Time: they teach, that he hath sent no one at any Time: and which bears hardest upon his Goodness and Wisdom? Undoubtedly they will say, that God makes due Allowances for the Disadvantages Men are under. Why we say the very same Thing: and why is not the Plea as good in our Mouths, as in theirs? Much better indeed: because we think unassisted Reason could hardly, if at all, teach Men, several Truths, which they think it could not fail to teach them: and therefore, as unaffected Ignorance is always an Excuse for Faults, Unbelievers, if they will be consistent with themselves,

selves, must pass a harder Sentence on the Heathen World, than Christians have Ground to do.

But not only the Generality of the World, before Christ, were possessed of this Advantage on our Scheme; but a considerable Part of it enjoyed, what might have been, if they would, a much greater; and as they wanted supernatural Instruction, so they had it. Revelations were made, as soon as ever they became needful, first to *Adam*, then to *Noah*, then to *Abraham*: each of whom doubtless communicated them to their Descendants. Now the Descendants of the two former were all Mankind; and of the last, several great Nations. Then afterwards, that astonishing Delivery of the Law on Mount *Sinai* to the *Jews*, preceded by such Miracles in *Egypt*, followed by so many more in *Canaan*, and made the Foundation of a large Commonwealth, professing Faith in one only God, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, was a standing Declaration of true Religion, first to all the Countries in their Neighbourhood, then to all the Countries in which they were Captives or dispersed, till the very Time of our Saviour's Appearance. The Effects of these Things, though much less than they might have been, were however considerable; perhaps the

chief Foundation of all the true Religion which the Gentiles had. And how much less worthy of the divine Goodness is the Doctrine of Unbelievers, that Man was totally abandoned by his Maker to Ignorance and Sin; than ours, that Interpositions from above in his Favour were thus often vouchsafed? And how greatly do these lessen the Difficulty, concerning our Saviour's Coming so late; especially if we add farther, what the Word of God much more than intimates, that all the supernatural Instructions which the World had from the earliest Times, were given for his Sake, and through his Means. Nay, were we to say farther yet, that he gave personally the chief of them; and appeared many Times for this Purpose, before he appeared in the Flesh: it would be nothing more, than Scripture makes probable, and learned and judicious Christians in all Ages have believed.

Since therefore the World had no Right at all to any Revelation of God's Will, and yet partook of it thus from the first; they were by no Means hardly treated, in not having the fullest Manifestation of it sooner. Nay, indeed, there must be something peculiarly pleasing to good Men amongst the *Jews*, in that gradual Increase

of Light, which was imparted to them, brightening on continually towards perfect Day. And every pious Mind, in every Place, had one Advantage, even from the Obscurity which encompassed them; that they could exercise a more acceptable Trust in the divine Promises, while they were less explicit: and intitle themselves to a greater Blessedness, for doing so much, while they saw in Comparison so little.

Still we own, that, upon the whole, they had not equal Privileges with us; and yet we hold, *that God is no Respector of Persons*^m: that is, he never makes unjust or unreasonable Distinctions: but that he makes very often such as we cannot see the Reason for, is as evident in the daily Course of Nature and Providence, as in the Doctrine of Revelation. It is most visible, that God withholds many Blessings, conducive to Virtue and Piety, as well as to temporal Happiness, from some Persons, some Nations, and some Ages, which yet he bestows on others: and why then might he not withhold, from the Ages before Christ, the Advantages, which those after him receive from his Coming, even though we could not shew, what End was answered by that Method of proceeding? But

^m Acts x. 34.

indeed we can shew many valuable ones : as I shall now proceed to do, under the

IId Head proposed, which is : That his appearing so late, as it was no Injury to the preceding Times, was a great Benefit to the following. For by that Means, Christianity was capable, both of being proved more clearly, and spread through the World more easily, and fixed in it more lastingly.

Had our Saviour appeared in the early Ages, there had been little or no Room for a Number of Prophecies concerning him beforehand. Or if there had, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to prove afterwards, that such Prophecies were made a sufficient Time before the Event. And thus one Kind of Evidence of his Authority, and a very strong one must have been intirely lost.

And for the other Evidence, that of Miracles : had Christ come and performed his, only a thousand or two of Years earlier than he did ; they who object now to his Coming no sooner, how much more would they have objected in that Case to his Coming so soon ; in a Period of Time, when Men were ignorant and unexperienced, credulous and unsuspicious, and besides incapable of conveying down to us with

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any Certainty what passed amongst them? Indeed as it is, are not some ready to say or imagine, though very unjustly, that the Credit of the Gospel History is less for its being so ancient; and wearing out continually, as Time runs on? What would they have said then, if the Time had been twice as long? Very possibly, there might have been little Need for them to say any Thing: almost, if not quite, every Ray of Truth might have been lost in the Thickness of the Medium, through which it was to pass; and at best the Son of God might have appeared no otherwise, than as one of the fabulous Heroes of Pagan Antiquity. Now indeed, having a Series of Revelations down to his Days, the latter Part attesting and confirming the former, we have sufficient Ground to rely firmly on the earliest. But had the whole been closed when the first was given, the Proof of it must have been much weaker.

Nay, had he come in the Mid-way, between those Times, and that when he did; in what State would he have found the World? He would have found the *Jews*, far from being capable of so spiritual a Religion as his, not sufficiently restrained by all the Fetters, and all the Pomp, of their own ceremonial one, from

gross Idolatry; and therefore plainly, as the Apostle observes, in the Condition of *Children*, wanting to be kept longer *under Tutors and Governors, and the Elements* of their Law, till they should come to be of Age for a State of Freedomⁿ. Besides, they were hitherto little known in the World; and as Christianity, for many Reasons, was to have its Rise in that Nation, the proper Time for its Rise was certainly, not till their Testimony to the Prophecies and Facts on which it was built, could reach farther, and have more Effect.

Then as to the Gentiles, the Darkness they were in, till a small Time before our Saviour's Appearance, was much too great for them to bear the Light of the Sun, breaking out upon them at once. Or had it not, they were divided into Numbers of small Kingdoms and States, continually at War. The Communication of a Religion, from one to another of these, would have been extremely difficult: and neither Miracles, nor Instructions, could easily have reached far. Jealousies would have arisen, that political Purposes of one against another were designed to be served by it: some such perhaps would have been grafted upon it. One Nation

ⁿ Gal. iv. 1, 2, 3.

would have favoured and established the new Scheme; another rejected and calumniated it: and by these Contests every Part of its Evidence, and especially that great one, the Disinterestedness of its Teachers, would have become so doubtful, that many considerate Men would scarce have known what to think of it.

Besides, had our blessed Lord's Instructions been given much earlier; after Times would never have known sufficiently the Need they had of them: but would have imagined, that, in a little while, Men would have found out of themselves, every Thing which he had taught them. Even now, after the Experience of so many Ages to the contrary, some tell us, that the whole of Religion, of all we have to believe and do, to hope or fear, is so plain, that no one could ever miss it. How much more plausibly then would they have said so, and indeed how much fainter a Sense should we all have had of our Obligations to Christ; if the most enlightened Parts of the World, had not, before his Coming, wandered so long in Superstition and Sin?

Nor is this farther Consideration without its Weight: that, had our Saviour come and delivered the Precepts of Christianity in their full Purity

Purity and Strictness, before the Light of Nature had been sufficiently improved, by a few of the Heathens, to discern and own the Justness of them; what is still said by some, would then have been said by many more: that they were utterly too rigid for the Nature and Circumstances of Man; and unfit to be required of such Creatures, as we are.

But now, instead of all these Inconveniences, the opposite Advantages are happily obtained, only by waiting, till *the Fulness of Time was come*. By this prudent Delay, the *Jews* were so far prepared for his Reception, as they were reclaimed from Idolatry: and therefore the *Mosaick* Law, which had been made to keep them from it, might be safely laid aside. Some of them were grown superstitiously fond of the legal Ceremonies: these it was Time to enlighten. Others were longing for that better State of Things, which the Prophets had foretold: these it was Time to bless with the Consolation they waited for. The Expectation, which they both had of the Messiah, would excite a great Attention to the holy Jesus: and yet the too common Opinion, that he was to appear as a temporal Prince, would sufficiently keep them from being partial in his Favour,

since

since he appeared in a Manner so different, Their Government was still in Being, and their Laws in Use, for those, who would, to examine into: their Countrymen were spread through a great Part of the Earth, to make the Examination easier: their sacred Books had been some Time before translated into *Greek*, the commonest Language then in the World, for every one's Perusal. By these Means, they and their Religion were well enough known, easily to afford all needful Information; yet by no Means well enough liked, to prejudice Men in favour of any new Doctrine, that should proceed from them. Nor could Men be prejudiced through them, on the Side of Christianity: for though they bore a considerable Testimony to it, yet most Part of them did it against their Wills; since, though many of them believed in Christ, the Generality did not.

This Condition of the *Jews* undoubtedly made the *Gentiles* much better Judges, of our Saviour's Claim, than they could have been, had he appeared before. And as to their own Condition; Learning and Philosophy had flourished amongst them for some Ages; but was then become more universal, than ever. It had freed the Minds of many from the established Superstitions. It
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had taught a few the Reasonableness of some of the strictest Precepts, which our Saviour afterwards delivered. And in these Respects it had very happily made Way for his Doctrine. But it had been far from accomplishing any general Reformation, even of Opinions, in the World. The Heathen Morality was founded on Speculation, too abstracted for the Bulk of Mankind; was fitted rather to confound them by endless Disputes, than teach them any Thing solid to rest upon: indeed, to say the Truth, it was never proposed to them or taught them publicly, but confined to the Schools of Philosophers. Nay, it had not convinced even them of many most important Truths; or of the Duty of professing honestly the important Truths, of which they *were* convinced: for they all conformed to the established Idolatries. Now these Things plainly shewed, that Reason alone would never make known so much of Religion, as Men had Need to know; and therefore Revelation was infinitely desirable. Yet at the same Time, no Age before had ever been so unlikely to embrace a false Revelation, as that was. The Improvement of Knowledge had thoroughly enabled them to distinguish between Truth and Imposture: the many Cheats of Paganism had put them on their

Guard:

Guard: the prevailing Sect of the Times was the *Epicurean*, which believed nothing of Religion. And even the prevailing Wickedness of the Times would be sure to keep Men from admitting, too hastily, a Religion, so strictly virtuous, as the Christian; and indeed, to discourage any, that were cunning enough to be Deceivers, from ever hoping to impose by Artifice and Fraud such a Set of Precepts on such an Age. Had it been one of as great Simplicity of Manners, as some of the foregoing; it might have been pretended, that the Goodness of the Morality of the Gospel had made its other Doctrines pass without Evidence. But to require of a Generation, so extremely vicious, what had never been required of Man before, an absolute Denial of every wrong Inclination of every Kind, was a full Proof of Honesty in the Teachers: and, if they prevailed, a strong Presumption of the Truth of what they taught. Now we know they did prevail. And as, without the least Learning, they delivered a sublimer and purer Religion; so, without the least worldly Help, they produced, in a few Years, a greater Reformation; than all the Wit and Power of Man had ever been able to do before: of both which Arguments Christianity must have been deprived, had God revealed

revealed it, before Philosophy and human Policy, had tried their own Strength.

But further yet, when our Saviour appeared, and scarce till then, the greatest Part of the known World was peaceably settled under one Empire, that of the *Romans*. On which Account, Men were much more at Leisure for attending to a new Religion: travelling and sending Intelligence was much more commodious: Christianity therefore was easily propagated; and its Proofs as easily examined. Besides this, its being persecuted so soon, and so long, through the whole of that vast Dominion, shewed its Professors to have no worldly Interest in View: which they possibly might, if the same Extent of Country had still been divided amongst different Princes; one of whom perhaps would have protected them against another. And their getting the better, by mere Argument and Patience, of this most formidable Power, was a strong Proof, that Truth, and the God of Truth, was their Support. To which it must be added, that the Scene of this noble Struggle being at the same Time the Seat of Learning, we have a sufficient Account of it handed down to us from the first, both by Friends and Enemies: whereas in the more ignorant Countries, where Christianity was taught,

taught, (and the Observation is greatly to its Honour) it either could not get Footing, or could not keep it; and where it lasted longest, little or no History of it remains.

These Advantages then our Religion had, from not being published till the Age, in which it was. If any former might possibly be as proper in some Respects, yet none will be found so proper in all. And if what hath been said hath only Weight enough to remove an Objection against the Gospel, no more is necessary. But I hope it will be thought a powerful Circumstance in its Favour, that the Time of its Promulgation was so evidently the right one. And I hope also, that considerate Men will take Occasion from this Instance to reflect, that in others too the Ways of God may be very just and wise, where perhaps, on a hasty View, they may seem very exceptionable.

But I must not conclude without adding, that the Care, with which our Saviour chose for our Sakes the fittest Season of coming, should make us very careful for our own Sakes to be fit for receiving him. The whole Benefit to us of what he did then, depends intirely on what we shall do at present: and all he hath gone through to help and save us, will only increase our Misery, if

if we neglect to help ourselves, by performing, (through the Means which he hath procured for us) all the Duties of a godly, righteous and sober Life, in the constant Expectation of his Coming again. Permit me therefore to conclude in the Apostle's Words. *We then, as Workers together with him, beseech you, that ye receive not the Grace of God in vain. For he saith, I have heard thee in a Time accepted, and in the Day of Salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted Time; behold, now is the Day of Salvation °.*

° 2 Cor. vi. 1, 2.

S E R M O N IX.

J O H N XX. 29.

Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they, that have not seen, and yet have believed.

THESE Words relate to the strange Unwillingness of one of the Apostles to admit the Testimony of our Saviour's Resurrection. And there is something so remarkable and instructive in the Account, which the Evangelists give, not only of the Behaviour of St. *Thomas* in the single Instance before us, but of the whole Behaviour of the various Persons concerned in the History of our blessed Lord, and especially in the concluding Part of it, that I shall desire your Attention a while to that Matter in general, before I proceed to our Apostle's Case in particular.

VOL. IV.

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Throughout

Throughout the Gospels, the Characters of all who appear in them, though very unlike each to the other, and some of them very uncommon, are drawn so agreeably to Nature, and presented so consistent ; (while yet the Writers plainly used no Art on the Occasion, and indeed were incapable of using it to any Purpose) that a considerate Person, without farther Evidence, must conceive the Descriptions to be taken from the Life. Supernatural Things indeed, of the most amazing Kind, are intermixed. But then the Cause was worthy of them in the highest Degree : and all the mere human Part of the Narration, if I may call it by that Name, is so intirely free from any Thing forced and romantic, and represents the Heads and Hearts of Men working so exactly as they do in Fact work, yet so differently from what the unskilful would be apt to expect from them, that it very strongly confirms the Truth of all that is related. I shall specify only such Proofs of this Point, as occur in the short Story of our Saviour's Death and Return to Life.

The Picture, which we have there, of the Bigotry and Superstition of the *Jews*, how astonishing is it, and yet, how just ! Zealous Professors of a Religion which prefers Justice
and

and Mercy to all Things; yet incited by that very Zeal to the grossest Violations of both: abhorring from Principle the *Roman* Power; yet making it in Form their Charge against the meek and lowly Jesus, that he was dangerous to that Power: determined to have his Life, though visibly innocent; suborning false Witnesses; raising Tumults for that wicked End; yet much too scrupulous to go into the Judgment-hall, lest they should be defiled, and made unfit to eat the Passover. At the same Time, *Pilate*, the *Roman* Governor, appears in quite another Light: a perfectly natural one indeed for a Man of the World; but which plain Country People, and such the first Believers were, would never have placed him in, from their own Invention. Contemptuously indifferent about the religious Accusations brought against the Prisoner: very clear, that the political ones were groundless, and therefore in Earnest desirous to save him: but however, making a Compliment of him at all Adventures to *Herod*, the Moment that he had Hopes it might reconcile, as it did, a powerful Enemy; and ready without Hesitation to crucify him, rather than run the Hazard of not being thought *Cæsar's* Friend. His Wife in the mean while, with the native Tenderneſs of her

Sex, and the common Superstition of the Age, lays a Stress on her very Dreams to dissuade him from shedding guiltless Blood.

The Disciples, on this trying Incident, we find represented to be of just such various and unequal Characters, as Men generally are indeed, but are seldom made to be in fictitious Compositions. *Judas*, whom Christ, though he knew him well, permitted to be an Apostle, (probably to shew, that the worst of Men, with the fairest Opportunities, could prove no Evil against him) after following him to make a Profit of keeping the Purse, first betrays him for a little more Profit; yet, like a true Villain, aims to conceal his Treachery under Marks of most affectionate Regard: is struck however with Remorse and Horror, when he begins to see the Consequences of his Crime draw nearer; but destroys himself, instead of asking Pardon, because his own Heart was too bad, to be capable of believing that his Lord could forgive him. *Peter*, on the contrary, whose Forwardness and Self-opinion had led him unnecessarily into the Neighbourhood of Danger, unable to go through the Trial, which he had chosen, sinks into very wrong Behaviour for a while: but having fallen merely through Weakness, is recovered by a

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Look of the Person, whom he had so meanly disowned, and gives immediate Proofs of the most ingenuous Repentance. *John*, the beloved Disciple, though driven away with the rest, (and no Wonder) by their common Fears, yet cannot stay with them; goes back, the same Hour, to his Master at the Palace of the High Priest; stands by his Cross the next Day, receives his dying Commands, and takes his Mother directly Home to his own House.

The Soldiers also, and the Multitude, are described with the same Justness and Propriety. Insolent and ludicrous beyond Measure at first, and for some Time; but gradually softened, and composed into Seriousness, the more they saw: till at length even the Heathen Centurion, who presided over the Execution, *glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous Man; truly this was the Son of God: and all the People, that came together to that Sight, beholding the Things which were done, smote their Breasts, and returned*^a. But let us proceed with the Disciples.

After his Death, we find them all absolutely hopeless about his Resurrection: a Circumstance which undoubtedly adds much Weight to their

^a Matth. xxvii. 54. Mark xv. 39. Luke xxiii. 47, 48.

subsequent Conviction of it; but which no Impostor would ever have invented, because it appears so hard to reconcile with their being foretold both, as they were frequently. A fair Solution indeed may be given. They thought, what others of the People said, *We have heard out of the Law, that Christ abideth for ever; and how sayest thou, The Son of Man must be lifted up* ^b? Expecting therefore a victorious and immortal Messiah, they chose, when he spoke of himself, as one who was to be taken and crucified, rather to put any Meaning, or none, upon the Prediction of his Death, and consequently of his Resurrection, than to understand each in its plain Meaning. But still no one would forge a Fact wantonly, that must be attended with such a Difficulty as this. Or, if any one had, he would scarce have divided the Matter so very exactly, as to represent the Disciples, (which the Gospels do) paying the highest Honours to his dead Body, though his dying extinguished all their Prospects from him; and when they had left off *trusting, that this was he, who should have redeemed Israel*, yet asserting without the least Doubt, that he *was a Prophet, mighty in Word and Deed, before God and all the People* ^c.

^b John xii. 34.

^c Luke xxiv. 19, 21.

Yet in Reality, such was the very state of Mind, in which Persons, with their Notions, must naturally be, till he rose again, supposing the Scripture History of him true : which therefore receives from hence a strong Confirmation.

And when he rose again, the Gospel Account of that Event also carries the like internal Marks of Genuineness. Every Thing is told in the most artless Manner : hardly any of the most convincing Circumstances dwelt upon, but merely related ; and none, that may seem unfavourable to Christianity, concealed or palliated. The Narration, a very lively Picture of the Disorder and Confusion, into which the Minds of the Apostles must be thrown by an Event so surprising, so interesting ; and laid before the World, with just such Omissions and trifling Variations, as would happen of Course in giving it to the other Disciples on the Spot ; and as always do happen, when we inform those around us, with the greatest Simplicity, of what we know best. Every single Part is consistent with every other, when considered with due Attention and Candor. But if any were less so, a few Differences in minute Articles, relative to a Thing done several Years before, is never allowed to invalidate a perfect Agreement in the main Fact. On

the contrary, the Testimony of the Apostles, instead of becoming suspicious on this Account, would indeed be rather more credible: as they would plainly appear not to speak from previous Combination; but each to deliver fairly what he recollected, concerning a Matter, of which he was much too sure in general, to be scrupulously accurate in Particulars. And the Holy Spirit, which guided them, might purposely forbear extending his Influence to some Things of small Moment, that in after-times Men might shew whether they would be reasonable, or whether they would cavil.

But one Thing, more especially remarkable, the Writers of the New Testament have done, which no Impostors would ever have done: they have recorded the History of their own Weaknesses, and those of all the Apostles, just as frankly and unaffectedly, as they have done every Thing else; and in no Point more fully, than in the capital one of the Resurrection. They acknowledge themselves, in general, to have disregarded such repeated Proofs of it, as deserved the utmost Regard. And, to come now closer to the proper Subject of my Text, one of them acquaints us, that *St. Thomas* particularly, having once fixed it in his Mind, that
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the Thing was not likely, and the Evidence not sufficient; insisted, that nothing less than his own seeing and feeling the Marks of the Wounds should convince him, that it was a Reality, and not an Apparition; the same Person, and not another.

Now this is going a very uncommon, and it may seem an incredible, Length; but there have been and are Persons, on some Occasions full as unreasonable, though otherwise deserving of much Esteem. And we learn from a Passage in *St. John*, which there is no Colour for thinking was written to account for this before us, that *St. Thomas's* Temper was peculiarly determined and resolute. Our Saviour, on the Death of *Lazarus* in *Judea*, declares his Purpose of returning thither from *Galilee*. His Followers dissuade him, because he had lately been in great Danger there: He persists: *Then said Thomas unto his Fellow-Disciples, Let us also go that we may die with him*^a. Now the same steady Firmness, when fixed on any other Point, however different, would be, as we find it here, equally hard to move. And therefore his Positiveness to trust no one but himself, is far from being improbable. Yet it was notwithstanding

^a John xi. 16.

very blameworthy. For of whatsoever one Man's Senses can judge, another's can judge likewise: and if credible Witnesses are not credited, all the Affairs of human Life must be at a stand.

However, this Perverseness being accompanied with no bad Meaning; *Thomas* having only carried somewhat further, than his Companions, the Diffidence, of which they had all been guilty; perhaps too thinking his Master's Promise, that they should see him, a good Plea for holding out till he, as well as the rest, had seen him; and continuing all the while in the Fellowship of the other Apostles, ready to receive the Proof which he demanded; our blessed Lord with perfect Goodness offers it him fully. *Reach hither thy Finger, and behold my Hands; and reach hither thy Hand, and thrust it into my Side: and be not faithless, but believing* ^e. This Condescension immediately melted down his Obstinacy, and awakened every right Disposition within him: so that, far from insisting on the rigorous Scrutiny, which he had before resolved to make, and was now invited to, he *answered, and said unto him*, we may partly imagine with what inward Feelings, *my Lord, and my God* ^f. *Jesus*, in whom Dignity and Mildness were mixed in

^e John xx. 27.

^f John xx. 28.

the most accurate Proportion, spares his Convert the additional Confusion of a Reproof: but gives him an Instruction, suitable to the Occasion, necessary for himself, and useful to all the World ever after; that no great Virtue could be shewn merely by admitting scarcely resistible Evidence, and consequently no great Recompence could be expected for it: but that preserving a Mind, open to embrace, and careful to seek after, such lower Degrees and less obvious Kinds of it, as our heavenly Father may think fit to bestow, is giving a valuable Proof of upright Intention, and taking a considerable Step towards the Attainment of distinguished Happiness hereafter. *Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they, that have not seen and yet have believed.*

This Declaration doth not mean, that any Believers merit a Blessing; which our Faith no more deserves, than our good Works do: but only, that Faith, productive of good Works, qualifies them to receive from God's free Gift, that Blessing, which Christ hath merited. Nor doth the former Part of it, which comparatively slight the Faith of St. Thomas, imply, that our Saviour's personal Attendants, who had the Testimony of Sense for his Resurrection and other Miracles,

Miracles, were either precluded from any Reward, or confined to a small one. For they had overcome very strong Prejudices : and, had they manifested ever so little Virtue in the speculative Part of their Faith ; yet they might and did manifest a great deal in the practical Part ; by adhering to it under Temptations, by professing it under Persecutions, by promoting it with unwearied Zeal : on which Accounts a superior Degree of Glory was justly promised to the Apostles ; notwithstanding *they believed because they had seen.*

But our Concern is chiefly with the latter Clause of the Text : and let us consider well, what our Saviour teaches in it. Not, that they are blessed, who have had no Evidence, and yet have believed. In one Sense indeed, of great Importance, even these are blessed. They have thrown themselves, with humble Minds, on God's Mercy : they are directed by the wisest Precepts : they enjoy the noblest Hopes : a future State is not less real, for their Want of Skill to prove it : and whatever the Ground of their Faith may be ; still the Fruits of it, Piety and moral Goodness, are the true Qualifications for Happiness, here and hereafter. But though such Persons are doubtless rewardable for the
Consequences

Consequences of their Belief, they are not so for their Belief itself, considered as a mere Assent of the Mind. And therefore our blessed Redeemer speaks here of a different Case from theirs. He came, not to require of Men Faith without or beyond Evidence, but to lay Evidence before them: and to assure them, that paying reasonable Attention to it should be rewarded, and rejecting it unreasonably, punished.

Some indeed have argued, that what appears to us false, we cannot receive; what appears to us true, we cannot help receiving; and Things will appear as they do: so that in Belief or Disbelief there can be neither Praise nor Blame. But, as by shutting our Eyes, or turning them another Way, we can exclude the Sun itself from our Sight, if we please: so, by refusing to attend, we may evade the Force of the plainest Proofs; and by attending partially, we may suffer ourselves to be overcome by the slightest Objections. Much more then is it possible to judge wrong or right in Matters less clear; according as we do or do not permit vicious Inclination, groundless Prepossession, Indolence or Fancy to influence our Choice. And having it as truly in our Power to behave well or ill in this Respect, as in any other; we may
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be as accountable for our Opinions as our Actions. It is therefore no less real, and sometimes no less important, a Part of our Duty, to conduct our Understandings well, than our Affections and Appetites. And further, as in the Government of these last, we are to be strict in Proportion as Negligence would be hurtful; and less Care is requisite, where little or no Harm can follow: so in the Use of our reasoning Faculty, though we ought to avoid all Errors, if we can; yet we should be much more vigilant against Errors to the Disadvantage of Religion and Virtue, than Errors in their Favour; and our Guilt is greater, if we are not: because the former must be pernicious, and the latter may be innocent.

But perhaps it will be said, that, whatever God intends for the Rule of our Faith and Practice, he hath certainly made both the Truth and the Meaning of it so clear, that we cannot mistake about it: and therefore whatever Doctrines or Precepts are not so clear, need not be regarded by us. Now undoubtedly, were we to have chosen our own Condition, we should have chosen it to be thus pleasing and secure. Or, were we to have guessed about it beforehand, we might have been apt to guess it would be so.

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But now, when we know from Fact, what it is in other Respects ; to flatter ourselves, that in Respect of Religion it must needs be so perfectly agreeable to our Inclinations, is palpably absurd. In every Part of our Conduct besides, we are liable to err fatally. How can we imagine then that there is no possible Hazard in this Part? The World, in which we live, was not designed for a Place of Safety but of Trial. And as we are tried with many Difficulties in doing what is right, why may we not be tried with some in discovering it? Indeed we actually experience that we are. In Multitudes of Cases, great Attention is requisite to find out Truth : and yet great Inconveniences follow, if we miss of it. We have certainly Cause to hope, that the Goodness of God will relieve us some Way, sooner or later, from any extreme ill Consequences of the Mistakes, that we cannot help. But they have no Title to Relief, who, notwithstanding all that they see to the contrary, will be positive, that there can be no Danger, and therefore needs be no Care ; but what they do not fully understand, and are not absolutely sure of, they may reject without Hesitation. These very Persons, in their temporal Affairs, are strongly moved by what they apprehend but
very

very imperfectly; believe every Day upon mere Probabilities, often small ones; take great Notice even of Possibilities; and would think and find it Madness to act otherwise. Why then may not Religion, considering its awful Nature, deserve a reverend Regard from them, though the Proofs of it were less cogent, or its Truths more embarrassed with Difficulties, than they are? The mere Suspicion, that a just and holy Being rules the World, makes our Case, and ought to make our Behaviour, very different from what it would be else. Every Degree of Evidence for it increases the Difference. And the obscurest Intimations, that can be given us, concerning his Nature, our own Condition, and what he expects from us, deserve our most serious practical Notice.

Nor must it be objected, that if such Things were intended to influence human Life, every one would experience their Influence very powerfully, which many do not. For was not Reason, was not the Principle of Self-preservation intended to influence human Life? Yet are there not Multitudes, who shew, and who have, comparatively, very little of either? But you will say, Then our Maker doth not deal equally with us. And in one Sense it is true

he doth not confer equal Advantages on us. But what Claim have we to them? If he may create various Orders of Beings, one much superior to another, as we all know he hath done; he may certainly give one Part of the same Order what Superiority he pleases over another Part. And that we should be ignorant, why he doth so, is no more a Wonder, than that we are ignorant, why Men are not Angels, or why Brutes are not Men. Yet, in another Sense, our Maker deals very equally by us all. He will make due Allowance, both to the inward Frame and outward Condition of every Individual; requiring only according to what he hath bestowed: which is perfectly consistent with bestowing on some far more than on others.

But it will be said, that whatever Imperfection or whatever Inequalities there may be from Mens Faculties or Circumstances, in their Knowledge, either of the particular Doctrines and Precepts, or the general Obligation of natural Religion; yet if God vouchsafes to super-add a Revelation, one main End of that must be, to dispel the Darkness, in which Reason leaves us; and it must answer its End: and yet in the Christian Revelation many Things remain as dark, as they were before. But indeed the

Solution of the former Objection, solves the present also. If God may justly give us, at first, as low a Capacity, or as little Opportunity, for Knowledge, as he pleases: why may he not afterwards make as small an Addition to it as he pleases; and yet Man be bound to receive such Addition with Thankfulness, and regulate his Conduct by it? If but the least new Discovery is made to us, if but the least new Light is thrown on what we discerned imperfectly before, it deserves proportionable Gratitude. And how much then do we owe for the many alarming and endearing Truths, Part of which are notified solely, and Part very strongly confirmed, by the Gospel of Christ!

But perhaps it will be urged, that still, besides leaving several of the Doubts of Reason undetermined, and its Difficulties unremoved, Scripture hath added several more to them, arising from its own mysterious Doctrines: and instead of clearing up every Thing, proposes to our Belief some Things impossible to be cleared up; with which otherwise we should never have been perplexed. And we own this to be Fact. But then, doth not the teaching of almost any new Branch of Science, in the whole Compass of Nature, produce the same Effect? Truth

is infinite: our Capacities finite. And the necessary Consequence is, that the farther our Knowledge extends, whenever we attempt to look beyond it, (which we need not) the wider we shall find the unknown Region, that borders upon it on all Sides, and incloses it round about. So that, if we will insist on comprehending every Thing, before we believe any Thing, the more is made known to us, the less we shall obtain of the Satisfaction we demand.

Once more, however, it may be objected; that supposing God to favour Men with a Revelation, he would certainly not fail to provide, that all Men might enjoy its full Benefit, since they are all said to have needed it from the earliest Ages: whereas Christianity appeared late in the World, hath never been notified through the whole of it, nor been accompanied with equal Evidence where it hath been preached. But here again: if God is not bound to give all Men originally the same Advantages, with regard to Religion or any Thing else, as he plainly doth not, how is he bound to it in what he superadds? Neither Justice, nor Wisdom, nor Goodness, oblige him any more to the one, than the other. Yet he did manifest to fallen Man immediately as much of the Doctrine of Redemption as he

saw to be requisite: which if Men lost, instead of propagating it, the Fault was their own. They who were ignorant of Christ before his Coming, or have been so since, may possibly have received much Good from it; but assuredly cannot be in a worse Condition, because others know him. And there is evidently more Kindness in making him known to some, than to none. All, to whom his Gospel is preached, be it with more Evidence or less, are, or may be, the better for it if they will. Such as firmly believe and obey it, have the highest Assurance of Pardon, Grace and everlasting Happiness. Whoever thinks it but probable, hath both a Direction and a Comfort, which others have not. Whoever by Means of it is but strengthened in the Principles of natural Religion, nay whoever hath them but more frequently laid before him, may gain considerable Improvement from it. For even the bare Proposal of Truth is often efficacious both against Ignorance and Error.

If still it be imagined strange, that this great Remedy for our Souls hath been a Secret to so many for so long a Time, is rejected by some who say they have examined it, and hath little or no good Effect on others who profess to accept

accept it; consider only, what is the Case of the best Remedies for our bodily Diseases? Were they discovered with Ease and immediately? Are all Persons now apprized of them? Is there no Room left for Doubt concerning them? Do none declare and inveigh against them? Do they answer, in every Case, every good Purpose that Nature intended them for? We have but too much Experience of the contrary. And yet doth all this hinder them from being valuable Gifts of Providence; or justify those, who despise or neglect them? If not, why should any one be staggered by similar Objections against Religion? Nay, supposing they did lessen the Certainty of it, why should he not *take Heed*, while he travels through the obscure and doubtful Road of Life, to every Probability of Direction from above, *as unto a Light that shineth in a dark Place*, however faintly it be, *until the Day dawn, and the Day-star arise in his Heart*?

This would be our Wisdom, though the Evidences, which we have for Christianity, were of the lowest Kind. But what will be the Folly and Guilt of scorning it, if after all they should, as they do, approach to the highest! We have not indeed the immediate Testimony

2 Pet. i. 19.

of our Senses for the Resurrection of Christ, for his other Miracles, and those of his Apostles: but we are as sure of them, as we could have been if we had lived within a Century or two of their Days. For the Books of the New Testament are unquestionably of no less Authority now, than they were 1500 Years ago. And even they, who received personally the Account of these mighty Works from Eye-witnesses to them, had perhaps but few of them the Attestation of so many concurrent Witnesses, as we have, recorded in holy Writ. And they could not have in the same Degree, (what Length of Time alone can give completely, and hath given us) the Knowledge, that those Facts, which were at first delivered to them for true, were not afterwards discovered to be false. We are certain, that Christianity, far from being detected, established itself on Earth, and triumphed over both *Jewish* and *Pagan* Unbelief by Evidence alone: that many of its Prophecies are already fulfilled, and Room is left, after so many Ages, for the fulfilling of the rest: which last Point alone will be found, on due Consideration, a remarkable Circumstance, and very unlikely to be accidental. Then further: as some of the Arguments for it are grown stronger than
they

they were formerly, to make Amends for such as may have grown weaker; so we have others which must always continue of the same Force: those, which arise from the Amiability, the Dignity, the Perfection of our Saviour's Character; from the Excellency and Efficacy of his Precepts; from the internal Marks of Genuineness and Veracity in the Writings of the Evangelists and Apostles.

Yet all this Proof, we confess, amounts not to the absolutely full Conviction, which they had, who *saw with their Eyes, who looked upon, and their Hands handled the Word of Life*^b. It is neither so obvious, but we may overlook it; nor so powerful, but, if we take Pains, we may resist it. Here then we undergo a Test of our Fairness and Integrity, which, in Comparison at least, the very first Christians did not. But then, you see, our gracious Master hath proportioned a Blessedness to it. And besides, they and their Successors underwent a much severer Test, which we do not; that of dreadful worldly Sufferings for the Profession of the Gospel. Ours is far gentler, and more eligible: only whether we will believe on Evidence abundantly sufficient, though not the highest possible:

^b 1 John i. 1.

whether we will *walk by Faith, not by Sight*ⁱ; and preserve our Loyalty to our Lord and our God, unshaken by the false Opinions and bad Customs of a thoughtless World, by the Cravings of sensual Appetites, and the Tumults of irregular Passions and Fancies. This is the whole of what Heaven requires of us: and if we do it but conscientiously for the short Space, that we have to remain here, *the Trial of our Faith shall be found unto Praise and Honour and Glory at the Appearing of Jesus Christ: whom having not seen, we have loved; in whom, though now we see him not, yet believing we may justly rejoice with Joy unspeakable and full of Glory; assured of receiving the End of our Faith, even the Salvation of our Souls*^k.

ⁱ 2 Cor. v. 7.

^k 1 Pet. i. 7, 8, 9.

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S E R M O N X.

R O M. x. 10.

For with the Heart Man believeth unto Righteousness: and with the Mouth Confession is made unto Salvation.

A Considerable Part of professed Christians go through the World, without forming to themselves any fixed Rules of Action at all: but in some Things follow their own Inclination and Fancy, how often soever it varies; in others, general Custom or particular Examples, with much Indifference, whether they be good or bad: and so they patch up a most inconsistent Life; many of them scarce ever reflecting enough to see their Inconsistencies; and not a few absurdly imagining, that human Conduct was not intended to be of a Piece with itself.

Others, who do preserve Uniformity of Behaviour, have yet no inward Principle from whence it flows, beyond Reputation or private Convenience. Even they who profess a high Regard to Morals, and in some Instances appear to feel it, have too commonly no Feeling at all of the strongest moral Tie which can be, that which binds us to our Maker; perhaps have never asked themselves in Earnest, whether they believe in him: or, if they think they do, have no serious Impressions of Gratitude to the Author of all Good, of Duty to the Governor of the Universe: will acknowledge, it may be, when pressed by Argument, that all possible Reverence is owing to him; yet absolutely never worship him in private, and very seldom condescend even to seem to worship him in public. Whatever the hasty Reasonings of a partial Heart suggest to them, they will esteem a Law of God and Nature. But if any Thing unwelcome either to their Vanity or their Sensuality be offered to their Belief, they will reject it instantly, as Bigotry and Folly, without Examination. And if their Way of thinking and living be but such, upon the whole, as recommends them to the Indulgence of those who need the same Indulgence; as to any Thing further,

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cerning the Regulation of their Tempers or Behaviour, the Means of Pardon when they have sinned, or of Help to do better, there is little Occasion, they apprehend, to trouble themselves.

This View of Things cannot but raise compassionate and melancholy Reflexions in every pious Breast. But what completes the Unhappiness is, that while such Numbers openly despise Religion, great Numbers more, who have no Doubt of its Truth, nor, when they consider, of its Importance, are yet so far from being zealous for it, that they seem ashamed of it: either omitting those public Evidences of their Christianity, which they know they are commanded to give; or meanly excusing their Observance of religious Duties as Weakness or Compliance with Custom: and seldom shewing in their common Conversation near so much Concern for that Faith, from which they pretend to promise themselves eternal Felicity, as they do for their slightest worldly Interests, not to say their most trifling Amusements.

The Spirit of God therefore, who clearly foresaw, that this, however strange, would be the Turn of Mankind, that some would think it needless to believe, and others to profess their Belief, hath warned Men separately against each

of these Errors in many Places of the New Testament, and jointly against both in the Text: which plainly declares, that Faith in the Gospel is the Ground of our Acceptance with God at present; and that an open Acknowledgment of the Gospel, in Consequence of that Faith, is one of the Things necessary to our Happiness hereafter. *For with the Heart Man believeth unto Righteousness: and with the Mouth Confession is made unto Salvation.*

From these Words therefore I shall endeavour to explain the Obligation and Importance

I. Of Christian Faith

II. Of a public Avowal of it.

I. The Obligation and Importance of Christian Faith.

God, having made us reasonable Creatures, may both as justly and as wisely require from us that we conduct our Understandings aright, as our Affections, Appetites, or outward Actions; the Conduct of all which depends on our Understandings in a great Degree. If then Religion be attended with Appearance of Evidence, inquiring into it must be our Duty: and if the Evidence deserve Belief, Unbelief must be a Sin; a greater or smaller indeed, according as it arises from Neglects or Prejudices more or less criminal; but a Sin it must be, wherever the Proofs are within

within Reach. And we may not only well presume that God would make them sufficiently obvious, but on Trial may perceive that he hath: adapting a great Variety of them to every Degree both of natural Capacity and acquired Knowledge, in such Manner, that no one needs be destitute, where Christianity is freely taught, of Light enough to convince and direct him.

Doubtless we ought to judge of Unbelievers with the utmost reasonable Charity. But, at the same Time, both we and they should consider well our Saviour's Declaration, that *If any Man will do God's Will, he shall know of the Doctrine, whether it be of God*^a. For thence it follows, that they who fail of knowing his Doctrine, where it is *taught as the Truth is in Jesus*^b, fail of it for Want of doing his Will. Either vicious Pleasure, or worldly Interests, or Indolence, or Resentment misleads them, which are visibly the common Cases; or, let them be ever so clear of Guilt in these Particulars, they are influenced by the Vanity of being superior to vulgar Ways of Thinking; the Pride of not being convinced, but by just such Evidence as they please to require; or the Presumptuousness of opposing their own Imaginations concerning

^a John vii. 17.

^b Eph. iv. 21.

the Probabilities of Things, (notwithstanding daily Experience of their Mistakes) to the express Declarations of an all-knowing God. In vain do Men plead their Morals in other Respects, while such Immoralities as these have Dominion over them; ~~or~~ their Obedience to the Commands of the Almighty, while they reject the great Commandment of Faith in his Word.

But the Duty of Faith doth not consist merely in giving our Assent to the Truths of Religion: a principal Part of it is, to recollect them frequently, and strengthen their Influence by repeated and voluntary Acts of the Mind. There are perhaps few in proportion, who had not a Sort of Belief, when they thought of the Matter last. But their Faith hath lain asleep and forgotten, till not only their Lives have been filled with such Behaviour, but their Minds with such Notions and Maxims, that it is hard to say, which prevails most in them, the Christian or the Infidel. Or if they remain ever so much persuaded, that Religion is true; they come to look upon it, as a Truth upon which they are not to act, and scarce to think of, till they have almost done acting. And by that Time, some have neglected it so long, that they

they go on, with great Tranquillity, neglecting it to the End; while some again awake from this Dream only to fall into another, that being sorry for having omitted their Duty, when it is become too late to do it, is doing it sufficiently. They, whose Faith lies in this Manner dead in them, have in Effect none at all; none of the right Sort, none to any valuable Purpose. And therefore the great Thing incumbent on us is, to revive and exert our Persuasions of Divine Truths; oppose them to the Temptations which assault us in this bad World; and believe, not with a languid Acquiescence in certain Articles and Precepts, when at distant Times we happen to recollect them; but with a vigorous Effort of all our Faculties to feel their Force on every Occasion. For it is not with the Understanding alone, but *with the whole Heart*, that *Man believeth unto Righteousness*. Nor do we become of the Number of the Faithful indeed, till we are determined effectually to bear Faith and true Allegiance to our heavenly King, as well as are convinced of his Title to our Obedience: till we resolve to live to him, who, we believe, hath died for us; and bring forth the *Fruits of the Spirit*^c, who hath planted the

^c Gal. v. 22.

Seeds of them in our Hearts. By this Rule then let us *examine ourselves*, (for it much concerns us) *whether we be really in the Faith*^d, or only seem to be so, deceiving our own Souls.

I now proceed to shew the Importance of this Duty: which is fully expressed in saying, that *Man believeth unto Righteousness*: that is, by means of Christian Faith, he becomes acceptable to God, and gradually improves in all Piety and Virtue.

Every one of our Actions derives its Value from the Belief or Persuasion, with which it is performed. Were we to do ever so good a Work, without being moved to it by a good Principle, we might be more useful, but we should scarce be better, than if we had not done it at all. But when we act from Conviction of an inward Obligation; if it be of Morals, then we act virtuously; if of Religion, piously. Therefore without Faith of one Sort, we can do neither: and in Proportion as our Faith is perfect, we shall do both. A mere Sense of the Fitness of moral Virtue is no inconsiderable Antidote against many Sins. But religious Faith hath unspeakable Advantages beyond that which is moral only. For the serious Persuasion of a Witness,

^d 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

*who seeth in secret**, of an omnipotent Sovereign, equally benevolent, wise, just, and holy, must inconceivably animate to every Thing good, and deter from every Thing evil.

Yet still, considering our native Ignorance, and the original Depravity which we find within; considering also, that by repeated Transgressions we fail not, more or less, to inflame our Passions and Appetites, darken our Understandings, impair our Strength, obscure the Prospect of all that we could hope for, and open a dreadful one of what we may fear: the Faith of natural Religion alone would leave us in a great Measure undirected, unassisted, uncomforted; as the Experience of all, who have been favoured with no other Guide, hath always shewn. Nay, instead of ever giving in Fact the Help, which from Reasoning we conclude it might, it hath always, in all Nations, been overwhelmed with Errors, both speculative and practical. But Revelation amply bestows on us every Thing we want; a plain and complete Law of Life, a most engaging Example of perfect Conformity to it, Pardon of Sin on most equitable Terms, Aid from above to do our Duty, and eternal Happiness for a sincere,

* Matth. vi. 6.

though imperfect, Performance of it. How greatly we stand in Need of these Things, a little serious Thought will make any one feel. Or if it did not, we surely must see, that God would not have offered them to Man, by a Method so extraordinary, as the Incarnation and Death of his Son, and upon the express Condition of Faith in him as the Author of them, if there had not been strong Reasons for it. And therefore whoever flights these appointed Means of *God's Righteousness*, must expect to stand or fall on the Foot of *his own*, without Allowance; and will have nothing to plead hereafter against bearing the Punishment of all his Sins, but principally the capital and leading one, of a wilful and careless Unbelief. May God incline our Hearts to consider what we are, and to accept his Mercy! For then, *being justified by his Grace, we shall be made Heirs of eternal Life*^g; *be sanctified by the Holy Ghost*^h, and *gradually perfected in every good Work to do his Will*ⁱ: a State, not merely of outward Regularity, but of inward Purity, which our natural Abilities themselves can never attain.

^g Rom. x. 3.^h Tit. iii. 7.ⁱ Rom. xv. 16.^k Heb. xiii. 21.

But

But in order to this amongst other Duties, we must join with our Faith, as the Text instructs us,

II. An open Avowal of it. For *with the Mouth Confession is made unto Salvation.*

There is no Part of the Gospel delivered in a more solemn and striking Manner, than that, which three of the four Evangelists record, and one of them twice: *Whosoever shall confess me before Men, him will I confess also before my Father, which is in Heaven: but whosoever shall be ashamed of me and my Words in this adulterous and sinful Generation; of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he cometh in the Glory of his Father with the holy Angels*^k. It could not be a slight Cause, which moved him to speak thus: and there was evidently a very great one. He came to establish on Earth a public Profession of true Religion, for a Testimony to all Nations. He intended his Disciples for *the Light of the World*. He formed his Church to be as *a City on a Hill*^l, to attract the Eyes, and direct the Steps of bewildered Travellers. Concealment therefore was utterly inconsistent with his Design: and all who believed in him,

^k Matth. x. 32, 33. Mark viii. 38. Luke ix. 26. xii. 8, 9.

^l Matth. v. 14.

must acknowledge him. That Persecution and Death would be the Consequence, he forewarned them, was to be no Objection. They were neither *to forsake the assembling of themselves together* ^m, nor dissemble their Faith, when separate; but to *sanctify the Lord God in their Hearts, and be ready to give an Answer to every Man that asked them an Account of the Hope, that was in them* ⁿ.

This then being their Case, what shall we think is ours? Can it be allowed us, can we wish it were allowed us, to avoid bearing Testimony to him, who *hath redeemed us to God by his Blood* ^o, when it will cost us only a little harmless Contempt, and perhaps not even that? Or whatever we may wish, let us remember, that in his just-mentioned awful Declaration, it is not being afraid, but *ashamed of him*, that he condemns: it is not the Terror of a persecuting *Generation*, but the Scorn of a *sinful and adulterous* one, by which he cautions us not to be moved. If therefore we conceal, on account of that Scorn, any Part of our religious Professions, we are guilty in the very Particular, against which his Sentence is pointed: and more guilty still, if we slight it, without so much as

^m Heb. x. 25.

ⁿ 1 Pet. iii. 15.

^o Rev. v. 9.

this to excuse us ; from mere Indolence or Humour ; or because, resolving to be Wicked, we will not acknowledge what binds us to be Good.

But to see the Obligation of this Duty in a fuller Light, let us consider in a distincter View, the Nature, the Reasonableness, the Usefulness of it.

We are not required to make an Ostentation of our Christianity ; or to introduce even the Mention of it to the Irreligious unseasonably, but only when there is Hope of doing Good. None who is not well prepared in Point of Argument, should be desirous of entering into Conversation about it with Unbelievers. But especially the Young and tender-minded should be very cautious of engaging in so unequal a Combat, as that of ingenuous Modesty against the profligate Boldness of the Scorners and the Libertine. Or if at any Time they are compelled to it, they should insist on the general Proofs of Christianity, and not be drawn into Debates on particular Difficulties, which, probably they are not able to solve without Help ; but wave the present Discussion of them, and apply for due Information about them. Nay indeed, the fittest in all

Respects to *contend for the Faith*^p should watch Opportunities, not force them, lest they exasperate and harden Men, instead of reclaiming them. And, be the Occasion of declaring ourselves ever so proper, we should be careful not to do it with intemperate Warmth; but always preserve the Spirit of our Religion, while we assert its Honour; and express more Concern for the Impious and Profane, than Indignation at them; considering seriously the Miseries, in this World and the next, which they bring upon themselves, as well as on those whom they seduce.

After guarding against these Mistakes, what is the Duty which remains? Only this, that without Forwardness or Affectation, without Vehemence or Bitterness, every Christian avow himself, in every becoming Way, to be what he is; by constantly attending the public Worship of God, renewing his baptismal Vow in the solemn Ordinance of Confirmation, steadily coming to the holy Table; and shewing, by the Reverence of his Deportment, that he doth all this as Matter of Conscience, not of Form: by practising with Simplicity and Openness every other Precept of his Religion; and leaving

^p Judever. 3.

no Room to doubt, from what Principle he acts: by *abstaining from all Appearance of Evil*^a in his own Behaviour and Discourse, and approving it in that of others: by despising the Contempt or Hatred, which may fall upon him for such a Conduct; *esteeming as an Honour the Reproach of Christ*; and *choosing rather to suffer Affliction, if he must, with the People of God, than to enjoy the Pleasures of Sin for a Season*^r.

These are the Things, comprehended in the Confession, that Scripture enjoins. And is any one of them unfit to be done by us, or unworthy to be required of us, or too heavy a Burthen to be laid upon us? And if none be, what have we to object? We cannot be Neuters between Religion and Irreligion: neither God nor Man will understand us to be such. Our Lord himself hath made the Declaration, and it is no less just, than peremptory, *He that is not with me, is against me*^s. Which then are we? Enemies or Friends? Do we pronounce, by declining to appear for it, that the Gospel of Christ is of no Value; or, by *not being ashamed of it, that it is the Power of God unto Salvation*^t?

^a 1 Theff. v. 22.^r Heb. xi. 25, 26.^s Matth. xii. 30.^t Rom. i. 16.

But indeed, were it allowable to be of neither Part openly, is it advisable? By declaring ourselves for the Truth, we strengthen ourselves in it: we take up a Character, which it will be our Glory and our Happiness that we are bound to maintain. And in all Likelihood we shall thus get rid of Solicitations from Infidels and Libertines; who will never quit us, while they find us wavering or fearful to be touched, upon the Subject; but will surely, either from Decency or Despair, be silent, when we have notified in a prudent Manner our fixed Resolution. To this we might also, if Need were, add a most equitable Request; that as they set up for the great and only Friends of Liberty, they would tolerate us in an Error, (if it can be one) which tends to make every Individual virtuous, and every Society flourishing; which comforts us under all Afflictions here, and delights us with the Hope of endless Felicity hereafter: and that they would not think the Belief of an ungoverned World, of unrewarded Virtue and unpunished Villany; of God's having left his Creatures without Instruction in their Duty, without Certainty of his Pardon and Grace, without Assurance of their future Existence and Reward, so extremely meritorious a Doctrine;

as to intitle the Maintainers of it to persecute the rest of Mankind with Scorn and Ridicule, (the only Weapons they have) till all are brought to an Unity of Profession in this blessed Creed.

Concealing our Faith may indeed secure us from being attacked upon it ; but not from the Dangers of licentious Discourse, not from being tempted in various Ways by others, not from growing indifferent and betraying ourselves into Sin. Besides : whilst we keep our Principles unknown, through a mean-spirited Fear of bad Men, we miss the Esteem and Friendship of the good : which may be of unspeakable Use to us ; perhaps in the most important Respect, enabling us to *hold fast our Integrity* ^u.

But we are to measure the Value of owning our Regard to Religion, not only by the Benefit, which we may receive from it, but the Service, which we may do by it. One Branch of it is, frequenting public Worship. Now it is very true, that many, who stay at Home, can use the same Prayers, and read as good Sermons in private, as they hear in the Congregation. But, (besides that probably they will not if they can ; and that certainly Numbers, whom their Prac-

^u Job ii. 3.

tice may influence, cannot if they would;) were every single good Christian to spend the whole Time, which they employ in religious Exercises here together, just in the same Manner separately; still the mutual animating of each other, the instructive Example, the awakening Call to a thoughtless World, these Things would be lost; the Christian Church, *the Pillar and Ground of the Truth* ^w, would fall to Ruin, by quick Degrees; the Christian System of Religion and Virtue would die and be forgotten with the present Believers in it, or even before them; excepting so much of it, as might perhaps be imperfectly preserved by Methods less effectual.

It is not therefore without Cause, that so great a Stress is laid on attending God's holy Ordinances: which whoever frequents reverently, teaches others to frequent them in the same Manner; but whoever shews Contempt of them, encourages others to do so too. And the like is the Case through the whole Extent of Piety and Morals. Where our Influence is the weakest, yet every one who appears in Earnest on the Side of God and Christ and Virtue, must add some Strength to the Cause, and some Spi-

^w 1 Tim. iii. 15.

rit to the Supporters of it. It is a common Warfare, in which we are engaged. If any one be allowed to desert his Station, every one must have the same Allowance: and then, humanly speaking, what hinders, but all must be given up? The Patrons of Infidelity and Libertinism, who, as one should think, have many Reasons to be reserved, they declare themselves without the least Scruple. Only consider therefore, if we are to be shame-faced and silent, while they are bold and boastful; how monstrous is the Impropriety, and how unhappy will be the Event!

But besides the general Consequences of *holding fast the Profession of our Faith without wavering* ^x, or shrinking from it; let us reflect also, what particular Effects it may have on our Friends, our Dependants, our Servants, our Families; on those who are united to us in the nearest Relations, and whose Happiness constitutes a great Part of our own. All who barely know us and think well of us, will of Course be in some Degree, either the steadier in the Faith and Practice of Christianity for our public Adherence to it, or more unsettled for our

^x Heb. x. 23.

seeming

seeming to slight it: and this one Difference in our Behaviour may very possibly have Weight enough with more than one amongst them, to determine his Conduct, and State for ever. But such as are intimate with us, will be more powerfully swayed by what they see in us. And they who live under our Roof, who naturally learn almost every Thing from us, who pride themselves perhaps in being like us, there is no Hope that they will be religious, if they have any Ground to imagine, that we are not cordially so. But taking due Care to shew them that we are, will do much towards promoting their future Happiness at the same Time with our own; and indeed the present Welfare too of both. For as Religion furnishes the strongest Motives to every Part of Virtue and Prudence; so, unless our Example instruct those around us to perform their Duty towards God, they will probably soon come to neglect it towards us, as well as towards others and themselves: whereas giving Proof that we honour him, is the Way to be honoured in Thought, Word and Deed, by them; by all the good, and even by most of the bad. Or how unequally soever Esteem may be distributed now, all will be
abun-

abundantly rectified in that decisive Hour, when they, *that sleep in the Dust of the Earth, shall awake; some to everlasting Life, and some to Shame and everlasting Contempt: when they, that be wise, shall shine as the Brightness of the Firmament; and they, that turn many to Righteousness, as the Stars, for ever and ever* ^v.

^v Dan. xii. 2, 3.

S E R M O N X I.

L U K E xiii. 23, 24.

Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few, that shall be saved? And he said unto them, Strive to enter in at the strait Gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.

TH E R E is scarce any Thing which proves both Wisdom and Rightness of Mind more fully, than proper Behaviour on sudden Occasions, and proper Answers to unforeseen Questions: for what a Man shews himself to be at such Times, we have in general great Cause to believe he really is. Now to this Trial, our Saviour, living a public Life, in the Midst of Persons taking all Advantages to ensnare him, was perpetually exposed; and his
Character

Character never suffered by it. His Temper continued always composed and beneficent: his Replies, when Circumstances allowed it, were open and plain: at other Times mixed with prudent Reserve; but always tending to convert the most unfit Enquiries into Opportunities of communicating seasonable Instruction. One Instance of this, amongst many, the Text affords: where we find, that as *he went through the Cities and Villages teaching*, some forward inquisitive Man was earnest to be told, if there should be *few* or many *saved*. To this Enquirer personally he answered nothing: but reproving his superfluous Inquisitiveness by a Silence, that expressed at once Dignity and Mildness, addressed himself to all, that were present; acquainting them what was the whole, that they needed to know and remember, in Relation to that Subject: in discoursing on which, I shall consider

I. The Question proposed.

II. The Answer given to it.

I. The Question is put in very general, and seemingly inoffensive, Terms: yet probably a great deal of *Jewish* Pride and Uncharitableness couched under it. For considering the known Spirit of that People in those Days, it is obvious

to suspect, that this busy Man's Inquiry proceeded from an ill-natured Hope of being confirmed in the natural Persuasion, that God was *not the God of the Gentiles* *; but had reserved future Happiness for the *Israelites* alone. And this is the more likely, both as their own Writers distinguish them by the Description of a *few*, in Opposition to the Multitude of Mankind ^a; and as our Saviour, in the Sequel of his Answer, declares that many *Gentiles*, from all Parts of the Earth, should be admitted into the Kingdom of Heaven; and many *Jews* excluded ^b.

But supposing there was no Ground for Imputation either of ill Will or Vanity; still all such Questions, for this is a leading one to many others, are useless and irreverent. To be satisfied indeed, that the Lord and King of all is just and good and wise, we are essentially concerned; for, without it, we could neither Honour and Love him, nor enjoy any solid Comfort within ourselves. And this general Truth, our Ideas of what infinite Perfection must comprehend, and our Experience of a right and kind and prudent Constitution of Things, unite to prove to us in a very convincing Manner. Since

* Rom. iii. 29.
and ix. 21, 22.

^a See 2 Esdr. viii. 1, 3. Comp. v. 15, 16.

^b Luke xiii. 28, 29.

then God is just, he will make none miserable, farther than they deserve: since he is good, he will both pardon and reward, in such Degree as is fit: and since he is wise, what appears Disorder and Confusion to our short Sight, will appear in the End perfect Regularity and Proportion. Had we been apprized only of thus much, we could have had no Right, however desirable it might have been, to know any Thing farther beforehand, even concerning ourselves; for it is enough, that we shall be treated with Equity and Mercy: much less could we have pleaded any Shadow of Right to be told, what Proportion of our Fellow-creatures shall behave well, and be accepted; or ill, and be punished; or why there are not more of the former, and fewer of the latter Sort; or any Thing of this Nature. To do our Duty, and trust God with the Government of his own World, would be our whole Concern.

Supposing him then to place us in a Station of much clearer Light; which, Thanks be to his infinite Bounty, he hath done; by adding those important Notifications, which we read in Scripture, of what we are to believe and do, to hope and fear: it cannot be, that his voluntary Communication of what he might have

have withheld, should authorize us to demand still more. Undoubtedly new Questions, in Abundance, may be asked on this new Face of Things: but who is intitled to ask them? And yet this is not insisted on, because they cannot be answered; for most, if not all of them, may very easily. Why are so many Nations without the Knowledge or Belief of this important Revelation? Partly, because Christians have neglected to acquaint them with it, or mixed it with Corruptions, or disgraced it with Wickedness of Life: partly, because themselves, or their Ancestors, did not attend to it, when proposed, with such Fairness of Mind, as they ought. But what then shall become of those Nations? Such among them as personally rejected the Gospel, shall be punished in proportion to the Wilfulness, or Carelessness, that was the Cause of their so doing: such as never knew it, shall be at least in no worse a Condition for it, perhaps in a better. But as to Christians themselves: Why have so many of them perverted their Religion so grievously? And why do so many of a purer Profession lead most impure and sinful Lives? Partly, because some lay Stumbling-blocks, of various Kinds, in the Way of their Brethren: but chiefly, because

others turn away their Eyes from the Light which they might have; or walk not suitably to that, which they actually have. And as, in all these Things, there are numberless Alleviations or Aggravations of Guilt; every Man shall be treated accordingly: some *beaten with many Stripes*, some *with few*^c. But in particular, what either shall suffer, we neither are told, nor have Reason to complain that we are left ignorant; since it will be our own Fault, if we suffer any Thing at all. *Therefore*, as the Second Book of *Esdras* justly exhorts, *Be not thou curious, how the Ungodly shall be punished: but inquire, how the Righteous shall be saved*^d.

But Questions end not here. Supposing it Mens Fault, that they obey not the Laws of God: why were those Laws made so strict? Because a holy Being could not enact any other, nor we be raised by any other to the spiritual Happiness, which he designs for us hereafter. The only Way therefore was that, which he hath taken: first to set before us a perfect Rule of Life; then to make every Allowance, that is truly equitable, for our falling short of it. But why was our Nature formed so liable to fall short of it, in the sad Degree that we often do?

^c Luke xii. 47, 48.

^d 2 Esdr. ix. 13.

Why, if it had not, an Obedience, proportionably exacter, must have been required of us; with less Hope of Pardon, and heavier Punishment for Disobedience; as in the Case of those *Angels, which kept not their first Estate* *. And whatever Advantage it might have been, upon the whole, to inherit all the good Dispositions, with which our first Parents were framed; unallayed with the bad ones, which they have transmitted to us; we are no more intitled to those Advantages, than to the Possessions, which our Ancestors have forfeited, or the strong Constitutions which they have destroyed, for their Posterity, as well as themselves. In some Degree every created Nature must be imperfect. And on many Accounts, that Variety of Degrees, which we see in the Works of God, is fit and useful. We know the Reasons, in Part at least, for which, Beings, much lower than us, exist: why may there not then be very sufficient Reasons for our being no higher, than we are? And where shall Man, or Angel, rest contented; if either may claim, as long as God can give? Poor as our Condition is here, still it was worthy of the Almighty to place us in it; else it had not been done: for we must allow him,

* Jude ver. 6.

who could make such a World as this, to be a better Judge than us, whether it was fit for him to make it, or not. And were it to continue, to its final Period, the strange Mixture of good and bad, which it is; yet considering the glorious Recompence, that going through it well prepares us for, we shall be far from having Cause to think hardly, or meanly, of Providence. But we have Assurance given us that the Days shall come, when *the Kingdoms of this World shall become the Kingdoms of the Lord and his Christ*^f, in a fuller Sense, than they have ever been yet. And perhaps, the Times already past may bear only a small Proportion to that joyful future Season, when Religion shall be rightly understood and universally practised, Mankind be happy, and God glorified. Blessed are they, that shall live in this State of Things: more blessed they, that shall contribute to it.

But, though we ought to attend, carefully and thankfully, to whatever Information God gives us, yet all Eagerness of knowing more than is revealed, betrays the same wrong Turn with that of the Inquirer in the Text; who, instead of the great Question, which it concerns every Man to ask, and which Christ came on

^f Rev. xi. 15.

Purpose to answer, “ what he himself should do to be saved,” chose to ask one, which he had no Concern in, and therefore could expect no Answer to, “ How many should be saved.” Accordingly our blessed Lord neither satisfied him, nor hath on any other Occasion declared, what Proportion of the human Race shall be happy, and what miserable. In one or two Places he seems to represent the former as the *least* Number ^g: in the Parable of the ten Virgins he makes them equal ^h: in that of the Servants, there is but one unfaithful ⁱ; in that of the Guests invited to Supper, but one that *had not on a Wedding Garment* ^k. And yet to this *last* Parable he hath added the Reflexion, that *many are called and few chosen*. In his own Days indeed this was most literally true: and has been too much so ever since. But still St. *John* foresaw a Time, in which one Part only of true Christians should be *a great Multitude, that no Man could number, of all Kindreds and People and Tongues* ^l: and the more ancient Prophets foretell, that all Nations *shall know the Lord* ^m, and *all be righteous* ⁿ. Plainly then it

^g Matth. xx. 16.^h Matth. xxv. 1, 2.ⁱ Matth. xxv.

15, &c.

^k Matth. xxii. 11.^l Rev. vii. 9.^m Jer. xxxi.34. ⁿ II. lx. 21.

could not be our Saviour's Design, upon the whole, to determine the Proportion between good and bad; but by a View of their Danger, to animate all in the zealous Pursuit of that Recompence, which, (be the Numbers of each what they would) too few obtained, whilst any failed of it: that so, as many as possible might be induced to take the right Course; and God be justified, how many soever took the wrong. Therefore, as the Book of *Esdra*s, already quoted, exhorts, *Ask thou no more Questions concerning the Multitude of them that perish. For when they had taken Liberty, they despised the most High, thought Scorn of his Law, and forsook his Ways.—It was not his Will, that Men should come to nought: but they, which be created, have defiled the Name of him that made them, and were unthankful unto him, which prepared Life for them* *. Justly therefore doth our Saviour in the

II. Part of the Text, to which I now proceed, refuse to gratify the Querist's Curiosity, and return an Answer intirely practical: that it was not the Business of Mankind to pry into what God had hid, but mind what he had revealed, and to master another Kind of Difficulty, that of

* 2 Esdr. viii. 55—60.

fulfilling

fulfilling his Commands : that Multitudes indeed, who professed Religion, would finally appear to have professed it in vain ; but this was a Matter, not to raise idle Speculations upon : God would be sure to take Care of his Behaviour to his Creatures ; let them take Care of their Duty to him : whatever Number should be saved, great or small, they knew the Way, and there was but one, to become Part of it : *Strive to enter in at the strait Gate : for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able.* Not that any Christian shall ever do his best to enter into Life, and fail of it : but that many imagine God hath marked out other Ways to Happiness than obeying his Laws ; and many too, who are fully sensible there is no other Way, use so little Diligence in following this, that their Progress is insufficient to arrive at eternal Felicity.

One fatal Mistake of Believers in Religion hath always been, an absurd Notion, that their steady Faith in it, their Zeal to support and spread that Faith, their punctilious Observance of certain Forms, their constant Practice of some Precepts, and their periodical Pretences of Sorrow for having wilfully lived in the Neglect of the rest ; that one or other of these
Things

Things would be accepted, instead of true Piety and Virtue. No thoroughly good Heart indeed can fall into this Error: but wrong Inclination, joined with Ignorance, or what is worse, false Instruction, may give it deep Root: and our Saviour, as he found it widely spread, took unwearied Pains to pluck it up. Immediately after the Text he declares, that neither Acknowledgment of his Authority, nor Attendance on his teaching, nor any Thing else, shall avail the *Workers of Iniquity*^p. And in his Sermon on the Mount, after stating the Duties of Mankind in their utmost Purity and Strictness, he proceeds directly to urge his Hearers, in Words very little different from those now before us, to a careful Performance of them all, however difficult, as the only Method of attaining future Bliss. *Enter ye in at the strait Gate: for wide is the Gate, and broad is the Way, that leadeth to Destruction; and many there be which go in thereat; but strait is the Gate, and narrow the Way, which leadeth unto Life; and few there be that find it*^q. All, who preach other Doctrines, he pronounces, in the next Words, *false Prophets*: all who depend on other Hopes, even though they had per-

^p Ver. 25, 26, 27.^q Matth. vii. 13, 14.

sonally followed him, and wrought Miracles in his Name, he utterly disowns, and assures them, they have laid their Foundation on the Sand. Indeed, through the whole of his Ministry, he had but one Rule, in relation to this Matter: *If thou wilt enter into Life, keep the Commandments* ¹. When the twelve, whom he had chosen, came, with great Satisfaction, to give him an Account of the mighty Works they had wrought, and the Devils they had cast out, he partakes in their Joy; but instantly adds; *Notwithstanding, in this rejoice not, that the Spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your Names are written in Heaven* ²: because by a truly religious Frame of Mind, you are qualified for that Place, *whither shall in no wise enter any Thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh Abomination; but they, which are written in the Lamb's Book of Life* ³. So perfect was his Regard to Truth and Virtue; that no Desire of gaining Disciples, no Tendernefs to the Disciples he had, could ever incline him to give any one Person the least Exemption from the least Duty. And if such was their Case, never must we indulge Imaginations, that ours will be more favourable. Christianity is not an artful Contrivance

¹ Matth. xix. 17.

² Luke x. 17—20.

³ Rev. xxi. 27.

vance for conveying bad Men, who will make use of it, to Heaven, fraudulently; but it is *the Doctrine according to Godliness* *: And its Advantage is, not that a Christian needs not be so good a Man as another, but that he hath the Means of being a better: which whoever fails to be, professes it only to his Condemnation. *Know ye not, saith the Apostle, that they which run in a Race, run all; but one receiveth the Prize? So run, that ye may obtain* ^u. *And if a Man strive for Masteries; yet he is not crowned, except he strive lawfully* ^v. Now there is one Law, peculiarly necessary to be observed, if ever we would obtain a Crown in the Christian Combat; which yet many are strangely prone to overlook, who would seem sincerely desirous to observe all the rest: I mean, an humble Dependence on God's Mercy, procured by the Death of our blessed Lord; and on God's Assistance, promised in Return to our earnest Prayers. Pardon is not a Debt, but a Favour; which the Giver may bestow on his own Terms. Our Sufficiency for doing our Duty, is not from ourselves, but from above; nor can we have it, unless we ask it: and were we to obey much more perfectly, than we do; it would still be no more, than what

* 1 Tim. vi. 3.

^u 1 Cor. ix. 24.^v 2 Tim. ii. 5.

we are bound to ; and even were that otherwise, eternal Rewards cannot be due for temporary Services. Presumption in our own Strength is destructive to our Virtue ; Confidence of our own Merit is injurious to our Maker : but a deep Sense of human Unworthiness and of divine Grace, will inspire us with that Lowliness of Heart which God will accept, and that Vigilance of Conduct which he will bless : *This therefore is the Victory, that overcometh the World, even our Faith* *. But besides all those who through blameable Mistakes thus fall into a wrong Way ; Multitudes want Courage to set out, or Perseverance to continue, in what they know is the right Way. For every sinful Habit is to be thrown off at the Entrance ; every virtuous Path, however rugged, pursued ; every vicious one, however frequented and delightful, shunned, throughout the Progress : Thus *strait is the Gate*, and thus *narrow the Way that leadeth unto Life*. Numbers see their Duty, wish to perform it, and faintly *seek to enter in* ; but not *striving* as they ought, fail in the Attempt. Perhaps they even do many Things well ; and would do all, but for one favourite Indulgence, or another, which they cannot re-

* 1 John v. 4.

solve to quit: so there they stop short, and are ruined for ever. Some Difficulties our very Nature produces; wrong Education many more; and when those of voluntary Custom are added, then the Opposition grows formidable indeed. But still our Saviour purposely gives full Warning of it; here in general Terms; but, through a good Part of the next Chapter, he specifies Particulars; shews, how many Things would render Men unworthy of *eating Bread in the Kingdom of God*^y: and as great Multitudes were following him, turns and assures them, they must quit every Thing that was dearest, and bear every Thing that was hardest to them, when Conscience required it, if they meant to be his Disciples: bidding them therefore *sit down and count the Cost*; consider well, how they should be able to perform what he expected, before they undertook it^z. Not that he intended to represent the *one Thing needful*^a, as a Matter of Indifference; that might be done or omitted, as Men should have a higher or lower Opinion of their own Strength: but, instead of drawing after him, by false Expectations, a Crowd of unthinking Admirers, that would first dishonour, and then perhaps forsake

^y Luke xiv. 15.^z Ver. 25—33.^a Luke x. 42.

him;

him ; chose to tell them the worst plainly, and at once ; that, as they could not but see the Importance of obeying God's Will, they might see and weigh its Difficulties too ; and so, with deliberate and well-instructed Resolution, enter upon the Work ; which however laborious, is indispensable.

They who have not been thus forewarned, go on indeed with great Ease ; but it is not in Religion, that they go on. Doubtless common Decency, and outward Regularity, are very valuable Things : would God, more Attention were paid to them ! But still with these there may be little true Sense of Duty, to God, or even Man ; little Care, that the Heart and Affections be such as they ought ; nay much Indulgence of very criminal Actions, either concealed from the World, or approved by it. In short, almost every Thing may be right, in the Opinion of those around us, perhaps in our own : and almost every Thing wrong in the Eyes of our Maker. How great is the Need then, that such as are proceeding securely in the broad Way, should be told the Difference of that which leads unto Life ! But to others also, strong Representations, of the Purity of the divine Precepts, and of the Obstacles that turn Men aside from the

the Observance of them, are highly useful : they excite us to search into every Branch of our Conduct, every secret Recess of our Souls: they prevent the Negligence, that betrays us into Danger; and the Surprise, that disconcerts and dispirits us at the Appearance of it : they keep up our Vigilance, put us on exerting all our own Strength, and asking more from God : by which Means, Temptations, that else might have proved fatal, are intirely avoided, or easily overcome.

Timorous and dejected Minds indeed may be hurt, by insisting too much on the Trials, which they have to go through : to these therefore a different, but yet a consistent, View of Things must be presented : and accordingly our Saviour, with the utmost Tenderneſs, invites *all, that are weary and heavy laden, to come unto him, and they ſhall find Reſt unto their Souls : his Yoke ſhall prove eaſy to them, and his Burthen light* ^b : in perfect Conformity to what had been propheſied of him, that *he ſhould feed his Flock like a Shepherd ; gather the Lambs with his Arm, and carry them in his Boſom* ^c. Religion hath both its Severities and its Encouragements: and the whole of both muſt be laid before Mankind ; but the one or the other dwelt on,

^b Matth. xi. 28, 29, 30.

^c If. xl. 11.

as the Case requires; that so, some may be alarmed into right Conduct, others quieted in it; and neither *the Heart of the Righteous made sad, whom God hath not made sad; nor the Hands of the Wicked strengthened, by promising him Life* ^d. But undoubtedly the principal Need is, of Mens being awakened to a Sense, that God requires much more, than is usually practised, or even thought of. For superfluous Fears, tho' we ought carefully to guard against them, are, of the two, not near so pernicious as deceitful Hopes. It is indeed a very awful Consideration that the Difficulties of becoming what we should be are so great; and surmounted by so few. But still the Truth ought not to be disguised: and the Difficulty of doing what may and must be done, is no Argument for any Thing but unwearied Diligence: and for that, it is the strongest Argument in the World. That most Men act wickedly, is no more an Objection against Religion; than that most Men act unwisely, is against common Prudence. That so many fail by taking a wrong Course, is only a Warning to make sure of taking the right. And if in that, several Duties are painful, it is not Christianity, that hath made them so. All

^d Ezek. xiii. 22.

its peculiar Precepts are easy in themselves, and Assistances to the Practice of the rest. The hard Sayings are declared indeed in the Gospel; but enjoined by Reason itself, when duly cultivated, and by the very Nature of Things. These therefore are unchangeably what they are; and all we have to do, is to submit to them. But if our Religion had made the Duties of Life stricter, it hath made the Hopes of Assistance and Reward so much stronger, that we should have no manner of Cause to complain; much less to faint. The Temptations to disobey, which arise from our Make and Circumstances, God himself hath exposed us to; and therefore if we apply to him, will assuredly support us under, to a Degree that he will accept. The ill Habits which proceed from wrong Education only, cannot have got very strong Hold; if we begin but to extirpate them, as soon as we come to the Government of ourselves. And as for those which, by our voluntary Misconduct afterwards, have taken deeper Root; since the Mischief is of our own doing, we are bound to more Pains and more Patience in undoing it again. When a long Irregularity hath impaired Health, a long Strictness of Regimen will be needful to recover it: but every Disease of the Soul is curable at length,

length, though many of the Body are not. Indeed the severe Trials are almost wholly at first; and therefore our Saviour hath peculiarly remarked, that *strait is the Gate*: but when once we have contracted our Appetites and Passions enough, to get through that; the remaining Obstacles diminish, usually by quick Degrees: and after a while, *the Ways of Wisdom become Pleasantness; and all her Paths, Peace* *. Then the Difficulties themselves turn into Delight, and the happy Traveller goes on his Way rejoicing; till, the Days of his Pilgrimage being completed, *Entrance is ministered unto him abundantly into the everlasting Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* †.

I conclude with the Words of a Heathen Writer; but highly deserving every Christian's Attention. "Think of the Life of Man, as of
 " a long Road, leading towards a holy Temple
 " where we are to be initiated in Divine Mysteries: a Road full of Passengers, some loitering and trifling, some running about, and
 " hindering one another; some wandering, and
 " losing themselves. For many are the devious
 " and deceitful Paths, leading to Pits and Precipices: but one alone, narrow and steep and

* Prov. iii. 17:

† 2 Pet. i. 11

“ rough and trodden by few, that points direct-
 “ ly forwards; which brave and industrious
 “ Souls, with great Resolution, force their Way
 “ through; earnestly longing for the Initiation,
 “ and captivated with the Beauty of the Place
 “ they aspire to: where when they arrive, all
 “ their Labour ends, and every Desire is fully
 “ satisfied. Begin the Journey then: enter and
 “ be initiated; take Possession of the good
 “ Things provided there; for Wishes themselves
 “ can extend no farther &.”

& *Max. Tyr. Dissert. 23. Ed. Davis, 4to, 39.*

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S E R M O N X I I .

J A M E S V . 12 .

*But above all Things, my Brethren, swear not ;
neither by Heaven, neither by the Earth, neither
by any other Oath : but let your yea be yea,
and your nay, nay ; lest ye fall into Con-
demnation.*

THIS Precept of St. James is plainly
taken from that Part of our Saviour's
Sermon on the Mount, where just the same Pro-
hibition occurs, only expressed more at large,
in the following Words : *Ye have heard, that
it hath been said by them of old Time, thou shalt
not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the
Lord thine Oaths. But I say unto you, Swear
not at all : neither by Heaven, for it is God's
Throne ; nor by the Earth, for it is his Foot-
stool ; neither by Jerusalem, for it is the City of
the great King ; neither shalt thou swear by thy*
Q 3 *Head ;*

Head; for thou canst not make one Hair white or black. But let your Communication be yea, yea; nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these, cometh of Evil^a. These are the only Texts of Scripture, where we meet with any Command of this Kind. And therefore to understand aright, as it greatly concerns us, what the Christian Doctrine is in relation to Oaths; our Business must be to consider well, and compare together these two Passages. There is unquestionably a strong Appearance at first Sight, that all Oaths without Exception are forbidden in them; and it is no Wonder, that many have been carried away by that Appearance, and held it unlawful to swear upon any Occasion. But whoever will examine the Matter thoroughly, can hardly fail, I think, to be fully satisfied of the contrary.

That an Oath hath no Unlawfulness in its own Nature, needs very little Proof. For what is it? It is acknowledging ourselves to stand in the Presence of God, and have him for the Witness of what we say: it is declaring ourselves to be sensible, that if we speak falsely, we forfeit his Favour; and confessing, that we forfeit it justly. Now these are Truths, all of them

^a Matth. v. 33—37.

highly honourable to God: and it cannot be sinful, it is indeed an Act of Piety and Worship, to make a serious Profession of them before him. And for the only Thing besides, which an Oath is taken to imply, that we freely consent to become Objects of his Anger, if we are not sincere; it must evidently be limited to such Consent, as we are capable of giving, to what will equally follow, whether we consent or not. We speak in the same manner on common Occasions perpetually; and tell those, to whom we apply, that if such or such a Thing, which we say, be not true, we willingly renounce all Claim to their Friendship. The Expression is universally understood, and used without Scruple, between Men: and it is just as intelligible, and allowable too, when addressed to God.

Oaths therefore, in themselves, are certainly lawful: and farther, they are highly useful also. For Men are so extremely prone, both to conceal Truth, and to speak Untruths, when their Passions, or their Interests, prompt them to do so; that they have Need of the most powerful Restraints to keep them from it; and those to be enforced, in the most affecting Manner, on their Consciences. Now undoubtedly the Thought,

that God knows and will avenge it, if we transgress, may awaken and check Men, when nothing else can. And the most effectual Way of bringing that Thought strongly into our Minds, is requiring us to make a solemn Acknowledgment of it, as in his Presence. He is indeed equally present, and equally just, whether we invoke him or not. But it is our Sense of his Presence and Justice, that must influence us: and nothing can possibly either excite or testify that, so completely, as an Oath.

It must be owned, great Numbers will certainly speak Truth without an Oath: and too many will not speak it with one. But the Generality of Mankind are of a middle Sort: neither so virtuous, as to be safely trusted, in Cases of Importance, on their bare Word; nor yet so abandoned, as to violate a more solemn Engagement. Accordingly we find by Experience, that many will boldly say, what they will by no Means adventure to swear: and the Difference, which they make between these two Things, is often indeed much greater, than they should; but still it shews the Need of insisting on the strongest Security. When once Men are under that awful Tie, and as the Scripture Phrase is,

have

have bound their Souls with a Bond^b, it composes their Passions, counterbalances their Prejudices and Interests, makes them mindful of what they promise, and careful what they assert; puts them upon Exactness in every Circumstance: and Circumstances are often very material Things. Even the Good might be too negligent, and the Bad would frequently have no Concern at all, about their Words; if it were not for the Solemnity of this religious Act. And a farther Advantage of it is, that when we have thus had the strongest Assurance given us, which we can have, concerning any Matter, we are naturally disposed to acquiesce in it: and *an Oath for Confirmation* becomes *the End of all Strife*^c.

This Practice therefore is of so great Consequence, that human Society would scarce be kept in tolerable Order by any other Means. Perhaps indeed a small Community, of which every Member scrupled taking an Oath, may, by strict Discipline, subsist for some Time without it: and a small Sect of such Persons in the Midst of a larger Community, may, under due Limitations, be safely excused from it also, whilst they continue sufficiently distinguished from the

^b Numb. xxx. 2.^c Heb. vi. 16.

rest of the World; and whilst the Value, which they set on this Indulgence, makes them fearful of doing any Thing to forfeit it. But were such a Permission to become general throughout a large Nation, especially one enjoying Wealth and Commerce and Liberty; were all the different Sorts of Persons in it to be released at once from what they all looked on as their strongest Obligation to Truth; it is easy to see, that universal Confusion must inevitably follow. And there is not any Age, or Nation of the World, but have shewn, that they were sensible of this. All Governments have ever required the most highly esteemed of their Subjects, on every fit Occasion, to confirm their Testimony by an Appeal to God: for if it is not demanded of every one who is able to give it with a good Conscience, how can it be expected of any?

Not only amongst the Heathens therefore, but amongst the holy Patriarchs also, from early Times, good Men have asked, and equally good Men have given, the Security of an Oath. God himself is represented in Scripture as swearing to Men: and Men are not only introduced swearing to God; *I have sworn, and am steadfastly purposed to keep thy Commandments*^d; but

^d Pf. cxix. 106.

in the Law of *Moses*, they are expressly commanded to *swear by his Name* to one another. Cases are specified, in which *the Oath of the Lord shall be between them*^f: and it is appointed, that if any Man *hear the Voice of swearing*, that is, have the Form of an Oath pronounced to him, as called to be *a Witness*, by the Magistrate; if he doth not utter upon that Oath, what *he hath seen or known* of the Matter, *he shall bear his Iniquity*^g. Nor do the Prophets, though they sometimes improve upon the Law, and carry Things to a higher Degree of Purity and Strictness, ever mention Oaths, but with Honour; provided Men *swear as Jeremiah* directs, *in Truth, in Judgment, and in Righteousness*^h. And far from intimating, that under the Messiah this Act of Religion would become unlawful; they foretell, in Passages, which must be understood of the Gospel Times, that then *unto God every Knee shall bow, and every Tongue shall swear*ⁱ.

But as all Things are liable to Abuse, and few Things in Religion have escaped it; great Abuses in the Matter of Oaths had prevailed amongst the *Jews*, before our Saviour's

^e Deut. x. 20.^f Exod. xxii. 11.^g Lev. v. 1.^h Jer. iv. 2.ⁱ Is. xlv. 23. See also xix. 18. and lxv. 16.

Days.

Days. Prompted by wicked Motives to interpret away the Obligation of the third Commandment, as far as they could, some of them pretended, that swearing to a vain Thing meant only swearing to a false one; and therefore made no Scruple at all of needless Oaths, if they were but true ones. Others, because it was only said, *Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain*, thought it very lawful, so they did not use that Name expressly, to swear when they would, by other Forms, however equivalent^k. And upon this Imagination a yet worse was grafted; that such Oaths, not being of the Sort, to which alone the Law related, they were liable to no Punishment for breaking them, nor consequently obliged to keep them^l. For these Notions we find in their Writings, preserved to this Day. Indeed our Saviour informs us, that in his Time they did not conceive all such Oaths to be void, but some only. If a Man *swore by the Altar, it was nothing: if by the*

^k Philo περι των εν ειδει νομων. *Lightf.* in *Matth.* v. Amongst the Heathens, *Rhadamanthus* first forbad swearing by the Gods, and directed them to swear by the Goose, and the Dog, the Ram, and the like. *Socrat.* l. 12. *rerum Criticarum in Schol. Aristoph.* in *Av.* which *Euseb.* in *Od.* r. p. 1871. *Ed. Rom.* saith he did υπερ τῶν μὴ θεῶν ὀρκιαζειν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν. And *Porphry de Abst.* l. 3. p. 285, saith, *Socrates* followed this Law of *Rhadamanthus*. *Socrates* saith in *Plato's Gorgias*, Μα τον κυνα, τον Αργυρηων θεον. *Jabl. Panth.* *Æg.* l. 5. c. 1. §. 5.

Lightf. in *Matth.* v.

Gift upon it, that was binding. And other like Distinctions without a Difference they had; by which the artful could entangle others, and keep themselves free ^m.

Such then being the Advantages of Oaths, and such the *Jewish* Perversions of them; which is it likely, that our blessed Lord intended to forbid; the total Use, or the Abuse only? Is it credible in the least, that he, *whose Kingdom is not of this World* ⁿ, should mean to take away from all the Governments of this World, a Right, which they had enjoyed from the Creation to that Day? Can it be imagined, that the greatest Lover of Mankind, that ever was, would loose the firmest Bonds of human Society; and make it a Part of his Reformation of Things, to forbid our acknowledging ourselves to speak in the Presence of God, and to incur his Displeasure, if we speak falsely? Certainly this was not his Intention, if his Words can possibly signify any Thing else: and I shall proceed to shew you, that they naturally may; indeed, that they must.

It is true, the Prohibition is at first View absolute and general: but so are many others in

^m Matth. xxiii. 16—22. See *Wolf*. Matth. v. 35.

ⁿ John

xviii. 36.

Scripture,

Scripture, and particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, which yet every one allows to have their Limitations in the Nature of the Thing. The very next Prohibition after this, is just as general: *But I say unto you, that ye resist not Evil* °. Yet on some Occasions, and in some Ways, we all do and ought to resist it. Another in the next Chapter is, *Take therefore no Thought for the Morrow* ^p. And a third immediately follows, *Judge not, that ye be not judged* ^q. Here all the World understands our Saviour to speak only of needless Thought and rash Judgment. And why then should not we understand him to speak of needless and rash Swearing; and apprehend, that he chose such comprehensive Terms on all these Subjects, because there was much Occasion to warn Men strongly; and in Comparison little Danger of their failing to make proper Exceptions? There is full as much Ground in the Reason of the Case, to think thus of the Point before us, as of the rest: and there is farther Ground from his Words themselves; for they are visibly pointed against the *Jewish* Evasions, which I have just mentioned to you. Some of them imagined, they could not sin by other than

° Matth. v. 39.

^p Matth. vi. 34.

^q Matth. vii. 1.

false Swearing. He therefore tells them, that Swearing at all was a Sin ; meaning, where they could avoid it : but Swearing before a Magistrate they could not avoid. Some again thought, if God was not named, the Oath was harmless. He therefore shews them, that their other common Forms were of the same Nature, as if they did name him : for they all referred to him ; *Heaven was his Throne, Earth his Foot-stool, Jerusalem his City* ; their *Heads* and *Lives* were preserved by his Power, not their own *. So that swearing by such Things, indeed by any Thing, is in effect swearing by God himself : (For *the World is the Lord's, and the Fulness thereof* :) and bringing any Part of it into the Form of an Oath, can have no other Sense, than appealing to him, as the Disposer of that, and the whole. Now from hence again our Saviour appears not to condemn Swearing before an Officer of Justice ; for on such an Occasion these Forms were never admitted. And what he doth condemn, the Words following his Prohibition, joined with it, as they ought, shew plainly enough. *Swear not at all : but let your Communication be, yea, yea ; nay, nay. Communication*, here and elsewhere, means, Discourse

* Matth. v. 34, 35, 36.

* Psal. l. 12.

with

with one another: as when *St. Paul* directs, *Let no corrupt Communication proceed out of your Mouth* [†]. The original Word, as well as the *English*, is the same in both Places, and confessedly denotes this. Oaths in common Talk therefore are the Thing, which our blessed Lord intended to forbid, and nothing else. Had he designed to prohibit more, he would have said, “ Swear not at all, but let your Answer, “ even though a Magistrate require an Oath “ of you, be only yea, yea; and nay, nay.” But when he saith only, *Swear not at all, but let your Communication, your usual Discourse* consist of naked Assertions, and no more; we cannot reasonably extend the first Part of his Precept beyond the latter; but must understand the Case, in which we are forbidden Swearing, to be the same with that, in which we are confined to bare affirming or denying: which is our daily familiar Speech. And a farther Confirmation of this, if it needs one, follows in what he adds: *For whatsoever is more than these, cometh of Evil*. Now common Swearing can indeed come only of Evil. But taking a solemn Oath on Affairs of Moment, may come, and often doth, from Reverence of our Maker, from Desire

[†] Eph. iv. 29.

of maintaining Peace and Justice amongst our Fellow-creatures : and actually maintains them in a better Degree, than could be done without it.

Our Saviour's Words then sufficiently interpret themselves : and they interpret those of the Text by necessary Consequence. For if he intended only to prohibit common swearing in Conversation, St. *James*, we may be sure, intended no more, than his Master did ; especially in Words, that are evidently copied from his Master's. If they are without Dependence on what comes before and after, we have no other Rule to explain them by. And if they are connected with it, the Connexion leads us to the same Sense. In the 8th Verse he exhorts to Patience under Afflictions. In the 9th he cautions against one common Mark of wanting it, envying the more prosperous : *Grudge not one against another, Brethren, lest ye be condemned.* Then after setting before them Examples of Patience, in the 10th and 11th ; he proceeds, in the 12th, to warn them of another Fault, which Impatience too frequently produces : *But above all Things, my Brethren, swear not : have a peculiar Care, that your Sufferings and Injuries tempt you not to a passionate and profane*

use of the Name of God : nay, *Swear not by Heaven, or by Earth, or by any other Oath* : do not imagine, that softening and mincing your Imprecations will change the Nature of them : *but let your yea, be yea ; and your nay, nay* : let your Assertions and Denials, under the greatest Provocations, be mere Assertions and Denials, without any superadded Vehemence of Phrase : *lest you fall into Condemnation* for irreligious Expressions of Warmth, as others will for uncharitable repining. We have therefore no manner of Reason to think, that St. *James* disapproved swearing before a Magistrate, to which his Prohibition of swearing by Heaven and Earth cannot possibly relate ; or even swearing on any other solemn and needful Occasion : but only such Oaths, as are apt to break out in common Speech, especially from Persons under Oppression.

And it is very material to observe farther, that the more serious and strict of the *Jewish* Teachers themselves forbid swearing in the same general Terms, with our Saviour and St. *James*. But when they say, as more than one of them doth, that “ it is good for a “ Man not to swear at all ; ” do they mean, that it is good for him not to swear in Cases, where
their

their own Law requires that he shall swear? Nay *Solomon* himself mentions the Character of him *that sweareth*, as a blamable one: and of him *that feareth an Oath*, as a commendable one *. Doth he mean to contradict *Moses*, whose Law was then in force, and to say no Man should take an Oath on any Exigence whatever? No certainly: but that he ought to avoid it, whenever, consistently with other Obligations, it can be avoided. Nay, the Heathen Moralists also, at one Time seem to prohibit swearing absolutely; and at another interpret their Intention to be, that an Oath should be used very sparingly *. In short, their Words, and our Saviour's too, were meant and taken in exactly the same Manner, as ours are at present, when at any Time we direct a Child, or a Servant, that they must be sure never to swear. And there is a most remarkable Instance, in the *Jewish* Historian *Josephus* *, of the Necessity of interpreting this Rule with some Exceptions; though it be laid down in as absolute and strong Terms, as well can be. The *Essenes*, a Sect of that Nation, he tells us, had so great an Abhorrence of swearing that they looked

* Eccl. ix. 2.

* See the Beginning of Sermon 15.

* B. J.

2. c. 8. §. 6, 7. p. 162, 163. Ed. *Haverc.*

upon taking an Oath, even as a worse Crime than breaking it. And yet these very Persons, he informs us but a few Lines after, were obliged on their Admission into that Sect, to take a most solemn Oath. And therefore in Reality they could condemn only needless ones, however generally they might speak, to guard against them the better.

But we have still further Evidence, that some Oaths remained, after our Saviour's Prohibition, as lawful as before. He himself, our faultless Pattern, made use of them. When *the High Priest adjured him by the living God, to say, if he were the Christ, the Son of the Blessed*; he affirmed upon Oath, that he was ^y. For, according to the *Jewish* Manner of swearing in their Courts of Justice, the Magistrate, as I have already observed to you, pronounced the Form of the Oath; and then the Person, brought before him, was understood to speak under the Obligation of it. Now to all the Questions of the High Priest before, our blessed Lord had returned no Answer: but to this, which he would have answered least of all, if judicial Oaths had been contrary to his own Precepts, he answers immediately. Nay, we find him

^y Matth. xxvi. 63, 64. Mark xiv. 61, 62.

uttering

^z M
^b Rom
27. O

uttering a solemn Oath, even where the Magistrate's Authority was not interposed: *Verily I say unto you*, we translate it, *there shall be no Sign given*; but the Original is, *if there shall be a Sign given, to this Generation*²: which, the Learned well know, is only an Abridgment of the common Phrase, "*The Lord do so to me,*" *and more also, if*^a *this be not true.*" But, lest any one should alledge, though without a Shadow of Reason, that our Saviour might exempt himself from what he bound his Disciples to; observe farther, that one of the most eminent of them, *St. Paul*, hath in several of his Epistles made use of one Form or another of swearing, on Occasions, which he saw were proper: *God is my Witness*^b: *I call God for a Record upon my Soul*^c: *These Things, which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not*^d. And which is yet more, he writes to the *Thessalonians* thus: *I adjure you by the Lord*, (for the marginal Translation is the right one,) *I lay you under the Tie of an Oath, that this Epistle be read to all the holy Brethren*^e. Now is it possible, that he should understand so little, or observe so ill, the Rules of that Gospel, which he

² Mark viii. 12.^a Ruth i. 17. ² Sam. iii. 35. xix. 13.^b Rom. i. 9.^c 2 Cor. i. 23.^d Gal. i. 20.^e 1 Thess. v.

27. Ὁρκίζω ὑμᾶς.

had learnt from Christ himself by Revelation, and received an extraordinary Commission of Apostleship to teach, as both to do himself, and oblige others to do, what Christ had forbidden; and even be guilty of it in those very Writings, which make Part of God's Word? Or is not his Practice, in these Circumstances, an abundantly sufficient Commentary on our Saviour's Doctrine? We have, besides this, if it were wanted, the Testimony of *Clement of Alexandria*^f, a Writer of the second Century, that St. *John* gave an Assurance upon Oath to a young Man, whose unhappy Case he apprehended to need it.

What the Practice of Christians in the two succeeding Ages was, is neither so material, nor quite certain. Some of them perhaps might think that our Saviour had absolutely condemned all swearing^g. Others like him might speak against it strongly in general: and yet like him allow of Exceptions. But no Wonder, if they were seldom willing to swear before Heathen Magistrates, because they must usually have sworn by Heathen Gods. And therefore *Ter-*

^f Lib Quis dives salvabitur & ap. *Euseb.* H. E. l. 3. c. 23. οὐ γυγνόμενος, ἐπομνυόμενος, ὡς ἀφισιν εὐρη [σε] ται. κ. τ. λ.

^g *Basilides*, when newly turned Christian, and required by his Fellow-soldiers to take an Oath, μὴ εἶναι αὐτῷ παραπαν ὁμνῆσαι ἀσέβειστον· χριστιανὸν γὰρ ὑπαρχειν. *Euseb.* H. E. l. 6. c. 5.

tullian,

tullian, who also lived in the second Century, acquainted the Emperors in his Apology ^h, what Sort of Oaths a Believer in Christ could take; and what he could not. But as soon as ever Christianity was established, Magistrates required this Security, and Subjects gave it, just as freely as had been done among the *Jews* before.

All these Considerations unite in shewing, that the Words of our Saviour and St. *James* relate only to swearing, without Necessity, in Discourse. But indeed were there much less to favour this Limitation, yet while the State of the World continues such as it is; if Questions of Importance arise, as they often do, which cannot be decided as they ought, without our Testimony, and the Magistrates will accept no Testimony, except upon Oath; how must we act? Must we stand by, and see Falsehood and Wickedness triumph, and the Fortunes and Lives of Men taken away unjustly, rather than do a Thing, confessedly lawful in itself, to prevent it? Or ought we not in such a Case to follow the Direction, *I will have Mercy, and not Sacrifice* ⁱ; prefer the moral and unchangeable Duty of supporting Truth and Right, be-

^h C. 32. Sed & juramus, sicut non per Genios Cæsarum, sic per salutem eorum, quæ augustior est omnibus Geniis. ⁱ Hof. vi. 6. Matth. ix. 13. xii. 7.

fore the positive and mutable one, if it were one, of abstaining from an Oath?

But the Case of Oaths not imposed by the Magistrate, is very different. And we ought to be extremely cautious about them, and manifest a strong Reluctance to take them. It is true, our Saviour's Prohibition is only of swearing in common Discourse: and what we deliberately assert on Occurrences of more than ordinary Moment, is of a Nature very superior to common Discourse: for which Reason, and especially since he and his Apostles did on such Occasions make use of Oaths, it is not always unlawful for us to do so too. But it is much more expedient and prudent; it shews a far higher Reverence of the Name of God, and a more pious Fear of transgressing; it is keeping ourselves from the Appearance, from the Borders of Evil; from becoming guilty insensibly, and then more and more guilty; resolutely to avoid such Oaths, whenever we possibly can: and most Men may avoid them intirely. It happens exceedingly seldom, to very few of us, that our Sincerity cannot be sufficiently evidenced, if we will, by other Methods of making it believed, that will appear abundantly worthy of Credit; without the awful Solemnity of an

Appeal to God; which ought to be sacredly reserved for Emergencies of uncommon Necessity.

Thus I have endeavoured to shew you, how far Oaths are lawful. And the Subject is material enough to be thus enlarged on, were it only for the three following Reasons: that Christianity may not lie under the Imputation, for a heavy one it would be, of censuring as criminal, what the Welfare of Society makes indispensable: that the whole Body of its Professors may not be accused of authorizing the Transgressions of one of its fundamental Precepts: and that none of you in particular, if at any Time called to give your Testimony in a legal Manner, may do it with a Conscience doubtful, whether you do well or ill: *for whatsoever is not of Faith, is Sin*^k. But a fourth Use may be, to lay open the Error of some, who imagine themselves led more immediately, than others, by the Spirit of God within them: but indeed are led, in this Matter at least, by mistaken Appearances, to condemn what Scripture hath not condemned, and the Good of Mankind requires to be practised. Only you will remember, that though the Consequences of their Opinion, were it to prevail, would be extremely hurtful; yet they cannot intend those

^k Rom. xiv. 23.

Consequences :

Consequences: for that would be intending Harm to themselves, as well as others.

There is yet one more, and a very serious Use, to be made of the Doctrine you have heard; that if the Bond of an Oath, on fit Occasions, be of such Importance to Society; since an awful Regard to God is what gives to all Oaths their whole Force and Efficacy, that Regard should be cultivated with the utmost Care; whatever may lessen it, discountenanced; whatever may augment it, encouraged: else, besides losing all the Direction and the Comfort, which Religion gives to well-disposed Persons; all the Restraint, which it lays on others, will be lost too: and the Dread of an Almighty Avenger being taken away, the most sacred of Obligations will become no better, than a more effectual Means of committing Injustice. Human Laws will soon prove too weak, when those of Heaven are cast off: *every one will do what is right in his own Eyes*¹, and every Man's Hand be against his Brother. Therefore diligently preserve the Reverence of God strong upon your own Hearts, and the Hearts of all who belong to you: for *the Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom; good Understanding have they, that do there-after: the Praise of it endureth for ever*^m.

¹ Judges xvii. 6. xxi. 25.

^m Psal. cxi. 10.

S E R M O N XIII.

E X O D. xx. 7.

Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his Name in vain.

HA V I N G already shewn, that the Christian Religion hath not forbidden the Use of all Oaths: it is natural to consider distinctly, in the next Place, those Kinds of Oaths, which are forbidden. And I have chosen to speak of this Matter from the third Commandment: which would have been of very small Significancy under the Gospel, as it only prohibits swearing in vain, if our Saviour, by a subsequent Law, had prohibited swearing at all. But as you have now seen that he doth not, it still continues to be of the same Force and Weight, as when it was delivered at first, from
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the Mouth of God himself, with that awful Solemnity, which you may read in the Chapter before the Text : when *the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai in Fire; with Thunders and Lightnings, and the Voice of a Trumpet exceeding loud, and the Smoke thereof ascended as the Smoke of a Furnace, and the whole Mountain quaked grealy^a. And the Lord spake with a great Voice, unto all the Assembly out of the Midst of the Fire, of the Cloud and of the thick Darkness, these Words^b, which I have laid before you.*

Precepts, delivered in such a Manner, we may be sure God will expect us to obey with more than ordinary Care : and therefore we are deeply concerned to acquaint ourselves with the Import and Extent of them. Now the Words of this Commandment are very comprehensive. For, as *Vanity* signifies in Scripture Language, both what hath no Being ; and what is of no Importance, and therefore is considered as if it had no Being ; so applying the Name of God *to Vanity*, (which is the most literal Translation of the Words rendered, *taking it in vain*) signifies of Consequence giving Testimony upon Oath, either to what is not, or to what in Comparison is nothing : that is, either to Falsehoods,

^a Exod. xix. 16, 18.

^b Deut. v. 22.

or to Trifles. Undoubtedly swearing to Falsehoods is the chief Thing forbidden here; and by some hath been thought the only one. But as the Words of the Prohibition fairly comprehend swearing to Trifles also; and as the oldest Translations, and most learned of the *Jewish* Writers have understood them to comprehend it; and especially, as our Saviour hath established this Latitude of the Phrase by his own Interpretation of it: we are certainly to consider them, as taking in both Senses. I shall therefore treat of this Commandment first as forbidding false Oaths; and afterwards, as forbidding needless and common ones.

Now Oaths are of two Sorts: either such, as affirm or deny somewhat concerning past or present Matters, and are called assertory: or such, as engage and give Assurance concerning Time to come, and are called promissory. To begin with the former.

If ever we assert any Thing upon Oath, which we know or believe to be false: if we deny any Thing, which we know or believe to be true: if we either affirm, or deny, in Matters, of which we know nothing: or if, in Matters, of which we do know something, we speak beyond our Knowledge; declaring ourselves to be

be certain of what we only believe; or to believe firmly what we only suspect and guess: every one of these Things, in its different Degree, is profaning the Name of God to attest a Falsehood. And farther, if, when we are sworn to tell the whole Truth, we conceal designedly any Part of it, which we think may be of Moment; here again we are guilty of breaking our Oath. Nay indeed, though we are not sworn to tell the whole, yet we should observe, that the only Reason of giving Evidence at all is, that Right may be done; and suppressing a Truth may sometimes as intirely mislead and deceive, as telling the grossest Falsehood. In short then, if we use any Method whatever, be it aggravating, or be it palliating, to disguise the real State of the Case: if we relate it in any other Manner whatever, than the fairest and plainest we can, after diligently recollecting and considering well: every such Artifice amounts to a Violation of this great Law of God.

And if Witnesses ought to observe such Impartiality; you will easily apprehend, that Jurymen and Judges are at least equally bound to it: for they are not only upon Oath too, but appointed, and intrusted by public Authority: and if any Thing influences them, but a steady
Regard

Regard to Truth; what should be the Security of Justice, becomes an Instrument of Oppression: *Judgment*, as the Scripture expresses it, *is turned into Gall; and the Fruit of Righteousness into Hemlock* *. Indeed whoever hath sworn to speak and determine uprightly, and permits himself to be any Way biaſſed; though he should happen to do right, yet ſince he was diſpoſed to have done the ſame Thing, though it had been wrong; is perjured in his Intention, though in the particular Fact he may not.

And greatly akin to the Guilt of being perjured ourſelves, nay often as bad, and ſometimes worſe, if poſſible, is that of inducing others to be perjured: a Sin which is committed, not only by direct hiring of them to ſwear Falſhoods; but by awing and intimidating; by courting and flattering; by intimating Advantages to them, if they can truly ſwear ſo and ſo; by talking them into a Perſuaſion of what they were not fully perſuaded of before; and thus making them ſtrain hard to believe, that they know or remember more or leſs, than they do. Another Way, and a very wicked one, of making Witneſſes forſwear themſelves, is, when artful Men contrive, that they ſhall uſe Forms

* Amos vi. 12.

of Words, of which they do not thoroughly understand the Import : or disconcert them so, on their Appearance in a Court of Justice, by improper Treatment of them; and astonish and confound them in such a Manner, by a Multiplicity of captious Questions ; that they hinder them from speaking the Truth which they intended, or drive them into saying Falsehoods which they did not intend.

And if it be sinful, by any such Methods, to make Witnesses bear false Testimony : it cannot be innocent, by unfair Suggestions, and false Colours put on Facts or Laws, to procure a wrong Verdict or Sentence. Let any one suppose himself a Sufferer by unjust Representations of a Case, and he will strongly feel, how bad they are. Surely then he cannot indeed think them allowable, merely because he is a Gainer by them.

It is very true, that in all these Matters, which I have mentioned, sometimes Interest, sometimes Prepossession, blinds People to a strange Degree. But therefore it is their Duty, and should be their Business, to watch themselves : for no inducement whatever can justify speaking or acting against Truth. Be it Affection ever so well-grounded, be it Resentment ever so just, be it Zeal for a Party, civil or religious,

ous, which we think it ever so needful to support; be it Respect for the Great and Powerful, Compassion for the Poor and Distressed; be it in a Word, what it will, that turns Men aside in Judgment from Justice and Equity; he who testifies or determines on such Motives, testifies or determines against his Oath. And because Men are often influenced by these Things, without seeing it distinctly; whoever is called upon to bear any Part in judicial Affairs, ought to examine himself beforehand with due Care; and purify his Heart from whatever Dispositions may corrupt his Integrity.

But there are some Occasions, on which Doing so is peculiarly requisite. If, for Instance, a Case, depending at present, may be likely to prove our own Case hereafter, or even appears to have any Connexion with it: we are strongly tempted to incline a little, perhaps more than a little, to the Side, that makes for us; and imagine, there cannot be much Harm in that: whilst yet we hold those in the utmost Abhorrence, who are but equally partial on the other Side. And if we have any Motive, that looks of a more generous Kind; if it may promote a good Cause, if it may serve a Friend, or a Neighbour, if it may relieve in what seems a

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hard Case; then we are apt to think it meritorious to transgress. But indeed no Cause is so good, as that of a constant Adherence to Truth and Right: and if we depart from it, for what we imagine a valuable End; we teach and provoke others to depart from it, for what they imagine such: and God knows then, who may prove the greatest Sufferers at last. As for the Plea of good Nature on these Occasions; it is never a true good Nature. For, in all Trials of Property, shewing any undue Favour to one Side, is doing just so much Hardship to the opposite: and in all Trials for Crimes, whatever is unfairly done for the Advantage of the Person accused, is done equally to the Disadvantage of public Order and Safety. And though possibly both some Cases and Laws, may seem and be hard ones; yet this is the Concern of the legislative and regal Authority, not ours: and though it be very laudable to obtain, if we can by proper Means, a Mitigation of the Sentence, and even a Change of the Law itself, when it is requisite; we can never be at Liberty, while it continues in Force, to elude and defeat it, by false Evidence or wrong Determinations. If we were, every one's Fancy would soon become the Rule of his whole Behaviour.

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There is indeed one Thing, that looks a little plausible, urged in Favour of such Practices; but it may be urged, as well, for almost any Sort of Dishonesty in the World: that if we scruple a small Matter of Unfairness, our Adversaries will not; and if they take all Advantages, we must too; else we are not upon even Ground. But in general, Sincerity and Integrity, with a moderate Share of Prudence, will do more than set us on even Ground. *He that walketh uprightly, walketh surely*^d. His Method of acting will be consistent, his Character will be his Advocate and Evidence: whilst artful Knavery will only entangle and discredit itself. But when this proves otherwise, as it sometimes may; our true Wisdom is, to be content it should: to support ourselves with the Testimony of a good Conscience; and look forward to the approaching Hour, when it shall be amply rewarded.

Such then is our Duty with respect to Oaths, in every Part of judicial Proceedings: and performing it faithfully is a Matter of such unspeakable Importance, to the Fortunes, the Reputations, the Liberties, the Lives of Men, that all Ages and Nations have shewn a strong Sense of it, and made Provision accordingly. The

^d Prov. x. 9.

Jewish Law hath expressly directed: If a false Witness rise up against any Man, to testify against him that which is wrong: then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his Brother, and thine Eye shall not pity^a. The Laws of some other Countries indeed have not gone so far: yet the mildest have shewn a Detestation, both of perjured Evidences and perjured Judges. And however Penalties, enacted by Men, may be avoided; the Judgments denounced by God cannot: whose Word hath declared: A false Witness shall not be unpunished; and he, that speaketh Lies, shall not escape^b. Wo unto them, that justify the Wicked for Reward; and take away the Righteousness of the Righteous from him^c. He that justifieth the Wicked, and he that condemneth the Just, even they both are an Abomination to the Lord^d.

If indeed Men give false Evidence without designing it, through unavoidable Mistake or Forgetfulness; they deserve Compassion, and not Censure. And if they should fail a little in the due Care of recollecting; or even should be a little warped by unperceived Prejudices: this, though highly blamable, falls very short of deliberate Perjury. And the more dreadful

^a Deut. xix. 16, 19, 21.
^b Prov. xvii. 15.

^c Prov. xix. 5.

^d Is. v. 21, 23.

that Crime is, the more cautious we should be, not only of committing it ourselves, but of imputing it rashly to our Neighbours. Let us therefore so judge one another, as remembering, that God will judge us all.

I shall only add, under this Head, that Assertions upon Oath, which are not before a Magistrate, but in a private Way between two Parties, though there is very seldom Occasion for them, yet whenever we do make them, require, as much as others, the strictest Veracity: and will subject us to equal Punishment, though not from our Fellow-creatures, yet from our Maker, if we employ them to mislead those, whom we profess to inform.

The second sort of Oaths, mentioned in the Beginning, are promissory ones: by which we give Assurance of our doing, or abstaining from, such and such Things hereafter. Now these again are scarce ever needful, and consequently scarce ever allowable; excepting where the Law of God or Man prescribes them. But when they are taken, their Obligation is not at all the less for their being taken unnecessarily. And therefore let us inquire how far it extends. In the first Place then, Men forswear themselves, whenever they swear to do any Thing, which

they know they cannot do ; as for Instance, to execute an Office, for which they are sensible they have not Abilities or Leisure. Indeed, if they only believe they cannot, or have no sufficient Reason to think they can, and yet absolutely and unconditionally swear, that they will, their Oath is plainly deceitful ; and may occasion pernicious Disappointments in the Affairs, with which, on the Credit of it, they are intrusted. Nor doth it acquit them, if unexpectedly they should afterwards prove able to do, what they thought at the Time they were not : as on the other Hand, it doth not make Men guilty, if they should not prove able to do, what they had Grounds to think they were : for in every Thing human, Allowance is made of Course for some Degree of Uncertainty ; and therefore needs not always be expressed. Again, if we promise any Thing upon Oath, which tho' we can do, we do not firmly intend to do, this is very gross Perjury : for our own Intentions we could not but know ; and therefore it is wilful Wickedness to swear contrary to them. Nay lastly, how well soever we might once intend ; if we are wanting at any Time afterwards in due Care to make our Promise good ; we violate our Engagement. For we give Assurance,

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not only of our present Purpose, but of our future Endeavours too: and therefore of our actual Performance, if we have it in our Power. So far as indeed we have not, our Obligation ceases; or rather, is suspended, whilst the Incapacity continues. For if ever we become able to do, what before we were not; and the Circumstances of the Case remain at all the same, as when we obliged ourselves; undoubtedly we are still obliged.

But suppose we have sworn to do a Thing, which is within our Power, but contrary to our Duty: what is incumbent on us then? Why, certainly taking such an Oath, knowing or even suspecting it to be such, was a great Sin. But performing it, instead of atoning for that Sin, would only add a second, and perhaps, in some Respects, a greater, to it. We have promised what we had no Right to promise, and a prior Engagement to observe the Laws of God, renders this void from the Beginning. But then, if only some Part or Circumstance of it, be unlawful; we are firmly bound to perform the Rest; indeed to come as near the Whole, as, consistently with other Duties, we can: and make as good Amends, as we are able, to those, who may innocently suffer by our Failure.

You will easily apprehend from this, that if we have promised any Thing upon Oath, which we can do lawfully; but cannot do without forfeiting some considerable Advantage, or undergoing some considerable Expence or Loss: we are by no Means absolved from it on that Account. For it is a known Part of the Character of the Man, *who shall dwell in the Tabernacle of the Lord, and rest upon his holy Hill; that he sweareth to his Neighbour, and disappointeth him not, though it were to his own Hindrance*¹. If indeed we were not of sufficient Understanding, when we made the Promise; if we were deceived or mistaken in any Thing essential to it; if it was not originally intended to bind us in Circumstances, like those which have happened since, though perhaps they were not particularly excepted beforehand: if any one of these Things be undeniably true, we are not bound. Again, if the Person, to whom we have engaged ourselves, release us; or if, where we cannot expect an express Notification that he doth, there be full Reason to presume it; then also we are at Liberty. And this last is the Case of some Vows to God. We ought to make none rashly: but such as we have made, we ought to keep;

¹ Psal. xv. 1, 5.

unless we have Ground to think, it is not his Will, that we should. And we ought to suppose it is his Will, if they neither contradict any of our Duties in Life, nor on the whole increase our Temptations: above all, if they help us to abstain from Sin, and improve in Virtue. But if our Vow be absurd, and unworthy of him, to whom we offer it; fitted only to load us with Difficulties, and ensnare us into Transgressions; nor is likely ever to have any better Effect; and if this be not merely the Language of our Inclinations, but the Dictate of our best Judgment, and that of other serious and able Persons; we may well conclude, it was never accepted and ratified by our Maker, but on the contrary displeasing to him: and therefore is neither necessary, nor proper to be observed by us. But if, in any of these Cases abovementioned, any real Cause of Doubt appear, the punctual and disinterested Side is ever the safest. For to him, that *despiseth the Oath, and breaketh the Covenant, thus saith the Lord God: as I live, surely mine Oath that he hath despised, and my Covenant that he hath broken, I will recompense it upon his own Head* ^k.

^k Ezek. xvii. 18, 19.

Such then is the Obligation of promissory Oaths: into which Obligation we all enter, though not in common legal Form, yet in real Effect, by the Vow of our Baptism, and we acknowledge it by every subsequent Act of Religion. Every Time therefore that we worship God, or in any other Way profess ourselves to be Christians, we bind ourselves to every Act of Christian Duty. But, to speak only of worldly Affairs: they, in the first Place, are under this Tie, who promise Faith and Allegiance, as good Subjects to the King. If any doubt of his Title to it, they ought to apply for what they may soon have, better Instruction. If they remain unsatisfied, they ought to refuse the Oath: and if they do so on a Principle of Conscience, though an erroneous one, they deserve Pity and Esteem. But whoever takes it contrary to his Belief, and contrary to his Intention, is a Profligate.

In the next Place, they ought frequently to consider the Nature of this Obligation, who have promised due Execution of Justice, as Magistrates: faithful Discharge of their Trust, as Officers: Diligence in teaching and exemplary Lives, as Ministers of God's Word. And lastly, it extends to all, who in their private Capacity solemnly engage themselves to each other, either

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in the more important Relations of Life, particularly that nearest one of Marriage; or indeed on any Occasion whatever. For though some Occasions may be much too slight to justify an Oath; yet, when we have given it, the Lord is Witness, if we fail to perform according to the Words we have spoken.

And now it must be observed further, concerning all Oaths, that they are ever to be taken in their plain Sense, and that in which we are understood to take them: for to have any other in Reserve, is only to mislead and deceive, under Pretence of giving Information and Assurance. If the Oath be a voluntary one, which we have framed ourselves; it can have no Ambiguity, but what is of our own making: and if we make it on Purpose to take Advantage of it, we are deliberately and shockingly wicked. Indeed when the Words are prescribed us by others, by Authority for Instance, if they are fairly capable of two Senses, and it no Way appears which was meant; we may certainly use them in either. But this will very seldom happen: and to invent forced and strained Interpretations, to evade binding ourselves whilst we seem to do it, is, if possible, worse of the two, than flat Perjury without any Evasion: for he is undoubtedly the
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most thorough Sinner, who is so with the most Art and Contrivance.

Some perhaps may imagine, that on certain Occasions, Oaths are become, by Custom, insignificant. And it must be owned, that Custom frequently alters the Sense of Expressions in common Conversation; and sometimes brings them by Degrees to be mere Words of Course. But solemn Assertions or Promises, above all upon Oath, are much too serious Affairs to have their Meaning changed, or sunk into nothing, by the Caprice and Fancy of the World, which governs in trifling Talk. Appealing to God, in the Nature of the Thing, can never be a Matter of Form only. And the more there are, who, in any Case, treat it as such; the more there are, whom *the Lord will not hold guiltless*¹. For when this awful Tie is once come to be carelessly and habitually broken, in any one Instance, be it what it will, there is a broad Way set open, to break it in every other. And though, for a while, Men may forswear themselves without Fear on one Occasion, and yet scruple it on another; they will soon discover, that the Difference cannot be exceeding great: and accordingly, first one Step farther will be

¹ Exod. xx. 7.

taken, then another; they that see this, will imitate and go beyond it; and at length general Confusion will be the Consequence. For we cannot subsist without placing Confidence in each other: and the firmest Bond of Confidence are Oaths. If therefore they lose their Credit; mutual Trust will cease, or become as pernicious, as mutual Diffidence; and Mischief will follow, without Bounds and without Remedy.

Nor are these dreadful Evils by any Means the only Aggravation of this Sin. Scarce any other affronts and dares God so immediately and directly. For the perjured Man renounces his Mercy to his Face; and openly calls upon him to execute his Anger, if he will. Besides, natural Inclinations, the Growth of our very Frame, prompt us to most Sins that we commit, and disguise them to our View under specious Appearances. But every Principle within us, till we stupify them all, revolts at the very Thought of Perjury. The Advantages, that Men gain by it, may indeed be extremely pleasing: but they cannot fail to be shocked originally at this Manner of gaining them; and therefore, if they use it, must act in full Opposition both to their Consciences and their Hearts. Of other Instances of Wickedness the World is apt

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to think very favourably; and indulge and encourage those that practise them. But a Man wilfully forsworn is an Object of universal Abhorrence. He deserves to be so in all Cases: he is so in most: and if in any, a Person, that is known to be such, can be looked on with the same Eye, as his Neighbours; just in the Degree that this prevails, human Society tends to a Dissolution.

Every Member of it therefore is concerned to express his Detestation of so impious and destructive a Crime. Law-makers ought to enact the most effectual Provisions against it: Magistrates ought to put them in Execution, with peculiar Vigour: and every Method should be taken, to render the very Imagination of such Wickedness alarming to Men. One Method of unspeakable Use, would be, to administer Oaths with great Solemnity; a Thing shamefully neglected amongst us: another, of which we are equally unmindful, to appoint as few of them as possible. Oaths, given and taken frequently, will be given and taken irreverently: till at last Multitudes will regard them very little more, than they do common Swearing in their daily Conversation. But especially they should be spared, where if they are not, Interest will be

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perpetually tempting Men to use them falsely, or procure others to do it in their Stead. Else, great Numbers will be drawn into a dreadful Sin, of which otherwise they would never have thought; and being conscious to themselves of having often transgressed so sacred an Obligation, will make less Difficulty of transgressing others also. The Intent of subjecting Men to such Oaths, will be answered very imperfectly and unequally: the Bad will be Gainers by Perjury; and the Good be put under heavy Disadvantages, perhaps be ruined, because they dare not incur the same Guilt. These are plain Reasons why Swearing should never be required by Law from those, whose Property, or any other favourite Interest, is concerned, if it can be avoided.

Yet still, when such Oaths are prescribed, though unnecessarily and imprudently, it may be impossible for either Business or Justice to go on, unless they are administered. But both Scripture and common Reason dictate, that no one ought to take them, who cannot do it with the utmost Sincerity. And therefore if our State of Life be such, that we cannot refuse them without suffering by the Refusal, we must either change it for another, not liable to the same

same Inconvenience; or bear patiently what a good Conscience brings upon us, and a good God will reward us for.

I must not conclude, without begging you to observe, that the Rules, which have been laid down, concerning Assertions and Promises on Oath, hold good concerning other Assertions and Promises too: and how crying a Sin soever Falsehood is in the former, Falsehood in the latter is the very next to it; hath the same bad Effects of destroying Faith and Trust amongst Men, though in somewhat a lower Degree; and the Opportunities for it are so much more frequent, that a Lyar, who never swore in his Life, may, by often repeating this lesser Crime, be more guilty on the whole, than even the perjured Wretch, whom perhaps he holds in Abhorrence. Remember then, that whether you call upon God to be Witness of what you say, or not; he is Witness. And it is presumptuous Wickedness, to utter an Untruth in the Presence of the God of Truth. For *lying Lips are Abomination to the Lord: but they that deal truly, are his Delight* ^m.

^m Prov. xii. 22.

S E R M O N XIV.

E X O D. XX. 7.

Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain : for the Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his Name in vain.

I HAVE already observed to you from these Words, that the Phrase of *taking the Name of God in vain*, strictly translated, expresses taking and joining it to *Vanity* : and that *Vanity* in Scripture Language means either what is not, or what, being of small Consequence, may be considered as if it were not. So that the Prohibition of swearing in vain, or to Vanity, comprehends both swearing to what hath no Truth in it, and to what is of no sufficient Importance. Having therefore laid before you the Nature and Guilt of the former of these Crimes, I shall now speak of the latter ; and shew you the

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Sinfulneⁿ Oaths, and Imprecations, and every Thing approaching towards them, in common Discourse. I am very sensible, that scarce any Thing can be said on this Subject, but what you have often heard, and know perfectly well beforehand. And it is a great Aggravation of Men's Wickedness, that they will transgress, where they cannot plead Ignorance. Perhaps there never was a Preacher yet, that hath not publicly warned his Hearers against profane Swearing: perhaps there never was a Person guilty of it, that hath not been told of his Fault in private too. Yet how little the Effect hath been, your own Ears may inform you so abundantly every Day, that no one can imagine it needless to say more on this Head. Useless indeed they may apprehend it will prove to great Numbers. But were that a Reason for being silent on any Point of Doctrine, think with yourselves, (and a sad Thought it is) what one Point would there remain for us to speak upon? Undoubtedly we should preach the Word of God with much more Comfort, if we saw a Prospect of doing it with more Success. But be our Hope of that ever so low, we must preach every Part of it; and you must regard, or disregard it, as you please, and take the Consequences.

quences. Our Commission is the same with that of the Prophet: *Son of Man, go unto the Children of thy People and speak my Words unto them, and tell them, thus saith the Lord God, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear*^a. Did only the lower Part of Mankind use his Name irreverently; yet they are the Bulk of Mankind; and their present and future Happiness ought to be of as much Concern to themselves, and to us, as that of their Betters. But if their Betters also rival them, often but too successfully, in the shocking Competition of profane Language; if that Sex, on whom it fits the worst, are not intirely free from it; and even those Persons, who are seldom guilty of it themselves, by no Means take sufficient Care to restrain it in others; the Necessity of giving frequent Cautions against it from the Pulpit becomes proportionably greater.

In Discharge of this Obligation therefore, I beg you to observe concerning all such Expressions,

- I. That God hath absolutely forbidden them.
- II. That there are many strong Reasons, why he should.

^a Ezek. iii. 10, 11.

III. That *Heathens*, as well as *Jews* and *Christians*, have condemned them.

IV. That no Plea of any Weight can be made in Favour of them.

V. That all may, if they will, easily abstain from them.

Were all Men disposed as they ought to be, one should think it might be enough of itself, that our Maker hath absolutely forbidden the unnecessary Use of his Name. The Words of the Text are extremely plain: you hear them read every Lord's Day: and you pray to him as often as you hear them, that he would *incline your Hearts to keep this Law*. Then the Words of our blessed Lord in the Gospel, are so exceeding strong against needless Oaths, that rather than not condemn them effectually, he hath chosen to speak, as if he condemned all Oaths. And for Imprecations, no Precept in the World ever was more express, than that of the Apostle against them: *Bless and curse not* ^b. What shall we say then? Do we allow, that God hath a Right to rule us, or do we deny it? You will not say, he cannot forbid common Swearing and Cursing: and surely, if he can, he hath. You will not say, that this Sort of Language is a

^b Rom. xii. 14.

Duty : why then do not the Prohibitions of Scripture make it a Sin? Suppose you could perceive no manner of Harm in the Practice, doth not God know better? And is it no Harm to do, what he hath said you shall not do? Suppose he intends it only for a Trial and Exercise of your Obedience : is that a Reason, why you should disobey? Would you bear that a Child or a Servant should treat you so? And can it be fit Treatment then of the Father and Lord of all? Surely, when once his Will is declared, that alone may be sufficient to regulate our Behaviour; and it doth not look well to be very exact in demanding to know why, before we submit.

However, that you may see this Obligation in a yet fuller Light; and that Religion may suffer no Imputation of imposing arbitrary Commands in the present Case; I proceed to shew you

II. That there are strong Reasons for the Precept now before us : which you will soon discern, if you think but a little of the Nature and Tendency of the Manner of speaking, which it forbids. God is a Being, to whom the very highest of his Creatures owe all possible Regard and Honour. And certainly our low Condition and many Sins, ought not to lessen, but increase

it. Both our Virtue, and our Happiness here and hereafter, depend on preserving sacredly in our Minds a Veneration for our Creator, such as may influence every Action and Thought. Can it then be allowable to intermix *his holy and reverend Name* ^c with all the Trifles and all the Follies, of our common Talk: to use that as an Instrument for venting our sinful Anger, for confirming every idle Assertion we are pleased to utter, for making our Discourse appear more lively and humorous? Can it be fit, we should embellish every silly and affected Exclamation of ours with the Name of God and his Christ; and introduce the Mention of his meritorious Death, of the Wounds which he received, and the Blood which he shed, for our Redemption, on such shameful Occasions, as Men daily do? Think only, what sort of Things they are, to which you sometimes hear the Lord of Heaven and Earth invoked to be a Voucher: Things, which Men would be ashamed to hint at in the Presence of an earthly Superior: and yet the great God is called upon, familiarly and without Scruple, to attend to them; called upon sometimes to bear Witness, that we resolve to do, what we know he hath forbidden on Pain of

^c Psal. cxi. 9.

Hell-fire.

Hell-fire. Be assured he is a Witness, and will be an Avenger too. *The Lord our God is a jealous God*^d. And he cannot suffer the Honour of that *Name* to be prostituted thus, which he hath commanded us to pray may be sanctified and *hallowed*.

Should he permit it, Piety and Virtue would be lost from off the Earth. For if Men make free in this Manner with the most sacred of all Things; talk of God and his Terrors in Jest; and call down his Wrath, in this World and the next, on themselves and one another, for nothing, some of them almost as often as they speak; what Possibility is there, that any real Sense of Duty should remain amongst them? Did you ever know a common Swearer, that was in Earnest religious? It cannot be. Either the Fear of God will keep him from this Practice, or this Practice will wear out of his Mind the Fear of God. That Awfulness, which surrounds and guards Religion, will be turned into Scorn, by taking such Liberties with the most important Articles of it. Consider: to swear is to acknowledge the Perfections of God, to pay him an Act of Worship and Homage. Oaths are consecrated by him to serve, on fit Occasi-

^d Exod. xx. 5.

ons, to this Purpose only. What a Crime must it be then, to debase them to such mean and vile Uses, as Multitudes do! Suppose any other Act of Worship were treated in the same Manner, and profaned every Hour, carelessly, and even in Mockery; how would this appear to you, and what must the Consequence be? Now let such Impiety be as shocking as it will; that of common Swearing is in its Nature full as shocking: and it is dreadful, that Men are so habituated to it, as not to feel it.

But farther: when Men are once grown fearless enough to break this known and plain Law of Duty; what Principles have they to deter them from breaking any other? When the Reverence of God is so effaced from their Hearts, that they can use his Name with Disregard and Contempt; what Hope or Thought can there be left in them of pleasing him? and where then is the Security of their not going on to offend him by whatever additional Sins they chance to like? Undoubtedly there are those who will swear, and yet will not commit some other Sorts of Wickedness. But there are few, if any perhaps, that will swear, and yet will commit no other Sort of Wickedness. And there are many, that began with this Transgression only; but
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when once the Breach in their Conscience was made, it soon widened, and they admitted through it, by Degrees, all the Vileness in the World. He therefore, that would not expose himself to become profligate in all Respects, must beware of becoming so in this. And they, that would not have their Children or Servants scruple nothing, must take care they shall scruple Swearing. For this is generally one of the first Steps which they take towards complete Worthlessness. And they go on afterwards much the faster, for another Reason. While they dislike profane Language, they are unqualified for profane Company. Execrations and Blasphemies make them tremble, and keep them at a Distance from the Abandoned. But if these Things lose their Horror, that Barrier is removed, and they are easily drawn in to contract Intimacies with those, who often *make them*, in a little Time, as our Saviour expresses it, *two-fold more the Children of Hell, than themselves* *.

Thus doth common Swearing lead to all Wickedness: but it leads peculiarly to that of false Swearing. *In a Multitude of Words*, the wise Man observes, *there wanteth not Sin* †. And in a Multitude of Oaths, there will never

* Matth xxiii. 15.

† Prov. x. 19.

want Perjury. The less of it any one runs into, who throws the Name of God out of his Mouth at Random, the greater his good Fortune is: but as the boldest Swearers are almost constantly the freest Talkers too; and call Heaven to witness the most plentifully, just at those Times when they speak with the least Consideration and Government of their Tongues; they cannot avoid being guilty of false Oaths perpetually. And, let any one of them speak his Conscience, he must own he hath been perjured a thousand Times. Perhaps he will plead, that he was not in Earnest. And were that always true, tho' I believe it is not, far from it, in any one such Person's Case in the World; yet is Perjury a Matter to jest with? Are Invocations of God, solemn Vows and Imprecations, Things for Men to cast wantonly around them, and say, *Am I not in Sport*? Remember, he, with whom you take these Liberties, hath made no Allowance for them in his Word, nor consequently will make any at the great Day. The Rule of his Law is express: *Ye shall not swear by my Name falsely; neither shalt thou profane the Name of thy God: I am the Lord*^a. And we have no Manner of Intimation, that this Command is to

^f Prov. xxvi. 19.

^h Lev. xix. 12.

give Way, as often as we think it proper to divert ourselves with transgressing it. Besides, there is but a Step, and it is easily made, from swearing falsely in Jest, or half Earnest, to doing the same Thing in downright Earnest. Taking Oaths too frequently, and with too little Solemnity, even before legal Officers, is acknowledged to diminish the Reverence due to them. What must it do then, to use them continually in common Conversation, without any Ceremony at all? And how can it be expected, that a Man, who, without the least Fear of God, or Regard to Truth, swears a hundred Times over to whatever comes uppermost one Hour, shall perhaps the very next, (provided you change the Scene) become superior to every Thing that would corrupt his Integrity in bearing Testimony? It will doubtless be said to this, that a Man's Honour sufficiently binds him to Veracity, when he gives his solemn Oath, let his Sense of Religion be as little as it will. But what if he can hope to avoid Discovery, and save his Honour? What if he prefers his Interest before his Honour? What if he thinks forswearing himself, on some Occasions, no Breach of his Honour, perhaps a Point of Honour? What shall bind him then, if the Fear of profaning God's Name doth

doth not ? But still, it must be owned you will say, that many common Swearers are Men of Truth and Probity. Why some, we acknowledge, are : and great Pity it is, that such as they, will be common Swearers. But if this Practice doth not lead every one into deliberate Perjury, is it not enough, that it leads many, that it tempts and endangers all the rest ; and that they cannot know beforehand, how great the Danger may, at one Time or other prove ? He that is swearing and vowing continually, it must happen, that sooner or later, he will swear to do something unlawful. What a Snare now is this ! It is a Sin to have taken such an Oath : It is another Sin to perform it : and yet it looks extremely like a Sin, not to perform it. Still he certainly ought not : but it is a great Chance, whether the Fear, or the Shame, of that imaginary Sin, may not drive him into the real one. Such probably was the Case of *Jeptba* : such undoubtedly was that of *Herod* ; who had never been guilty of murdering *John* the Baptist, if he had not first been guilty of Swearing inconsiderately. For the Evangelists expressly tell us, *the King was exceeding sorry : yet for his Oath's Sake, and for their Sakes who sat at Meat with him, he sent and beheaded John in the Prison.*

*Prison*¹. Indeed it is a common Excuse, that Men make for acting, as they are sensible they ought not, and would not else, that they have sworn to do it, and therefore must and will.

But suppose the Danger were only that of swearing to do Things not unlawful in their Nature, but inconvenient and prejudicial to us; it would surely be a sufficient Reason against needless Oaths. For in that Case, unless we be released from our Engagement, which we cannot always be, the Scripture very justly directs: *If a Man vow a Vow unto the Lord, or swear an Oath to bind his Soul with a Bond: he shall not break his Word; he shall do according to all, that proceedeth out of his Mouth*^k. Is it not then a very wise Caution, which Solomon gives? *Be not rash with thy Mouth: and let not thine Heart be hasty to utter any Thing before God*¹. For many a Time have Men lamented, thro' their whole Lives, the unhappy Consequences of one single Oath.

It is very true, we may entangle ourselves by unlawful or imprudent Promises, tho' we do not add this Confirmation to them. But yet, Oaths are understood to be, and therefore are, a much more solemn and strong and irrevocable Tie,

¹ Matth. xiv. 9, 10. Mark vi. 26, 27. ^k Numb. xxx. 2.
¹ Eccl. v. 2.

than mere Promises ; and consequently make the Case just so much the worse. Besides, the same Guard upon themselves, that restrains Men from swearing rashly, will restrain them also from promising rashly : whereas he, that is ready to pour out Oaths on every Occasion, is in perpetual Danger of binding himself down at once, by the strongest Obligation under which he can be laid.

On the whole therefore, the Son of Sirach's Advice is extremely important. *Hear, O ye Children, the Discipline of the Mouth : He that keepeth it, shall never be taken in his Lips.—Accustom not thy Mouth to swearing : neither use thyself to the naming of the Holy One. For as the Servant, that is continually beaten, shall not be without a blue Mark : so he, that sweareth and nameth God continually, shall not be faultless. A Man, that useth much Swearing shall be filled with Iniquity, and the Plague shall never depart from his House. If he shall offend, his Sin shall be upon him : and if he acknowledge not his Sin he maketh a double Offence.—There is a Word that is clothed about with Death : God grant that it be not found in the Heritage of Jacob : for all such Things shall be far from the Godly ^m.*

^m Ecclus xxiii. 7—12.

But, besides the Sins and Dangers which I have hitherto pointed out, consider the Matter in another Light, and you will see many more, of great Moment, attending this Practice. The Spirit of Religion is a Spirit of Mildness and Benevolence. Even the Irreligious, if they profess any Regard to Principle, profess a high Esteem for these Virtues. And there are few Things less consistent with them, than the common Use of Oaths and Imprecations. Cursing is the Expression of a Heart, not satisfied with the Mischief, that we can and dare inflict ourselves, but that seeks to interest even the great God, in making the Person, with whom we are displeased, completely miserable. Recollect but a little, the dreadful Words, that are uttered; consider a while, what Things they are, which they who indulge themselves this Way, beg of Heaven may fall on one another's Heads: is it possible for the very Fiends to go beyond the Rage and Malignity of such Language? And let it not be pleaded, that they mean nothing of what they say. They mean often but too much of it, at least for the Time; mean almost always to shew a very sinful Wrath and Bitterness: and the Way, which they take to shew it, inflames it still more. For hardly any Thing
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upon Earth blows up Anger to so outrageous a Vehemence, as venting it in Oaths and Curses. They rouse up the Passion of those, who use them: they provoke Passion in Return from those to whom they are used: and when once the Flame thus kindled, blazes out on both Sides, can there be in Nature a more hellish Spectacle seen or imagined? But suppose the Swearer to be of a calmer Disposition; continually throwing out Phrases, of such terrible Import, upon all who are about him, cannot fail to lessen whatever Humanity he hath, and harden his Heart towards them gradually. The least they imply is an immoral Disregard of what becomes of them. And we shall never preserve that equitable Attention to others and their Remonstrances, which we certainly ought, if once we get a Habit of driving away with a hasty Curse, whoever at any Time importunes us with his Applications. Common Swearers may be, to some Persons, and on some Occasions, very good natured Men: but on others, they find a threatening Oath or two is so very short and easy a Way, to get rid of a Difficulty, right or wrong, that they often venture on most barbarous Behaviour, under this Protection: and sometimes, it may be feared, affect such Language,

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age, merely to screen them from doing their Duties, and in particular from paying their Debts; or to deceive those, with whom they converse; or terrify those whom they cannot deceive.

But besides that Oaths and Curses are commonly used to support other Injuries, they are Injuries and Outrages themselves. To our Superiors they are Affronts and Indignities: to our Equals they are Rudeness: and it is a mean-spirited Insolence to shew our Contempt of those beneath us, by them, for no other Reason, than because we know they must bear it. But indeed Words of this Nature are justly offensive, not only to the Persons, against whom you direct them, but to all within hearing. For how have they deserved, to be made Witnesses, whether they will or not, of all the Brutalities you are pleased to utter? Even before those who have no Religion, such Transports must be extremely unbecoming. But remember too, there are some who have Religion; whose Ears it grates, and whose Heart it grieves, as well it may, to hear the Commandments of their God transgressed, and his holy Name profaned wantonly. Why are not these to have due Regard paid them? Why should it not be thought, in a Nation pro-

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fessing Christianity, a Point of common Decency, in all Men, to abstain from open Violations of Christian Precepts? And really, to behave without common Decency, above all to the Religion of a Country, is of itself no small Immorality. The other Civilities of Life are generally kept up, in outward Form at least; and often to a great Degree of Delicacy. Whatever would be displeasing to any one, be the Dislike of it ever so fanciful, is carefully avoided: and it is of considerable Importance to our Happiness, to act so. What Ground is there then, to make an Exception in this one Case? And why must you treat *the King of all the Earth*ⁿ, before those who honour him, with that Disrespect, which you would not express towards any common Person, for whom any of the Company present had the least Regard? Such Behaviour would produce dangerous Resentments, on almost every other Occasion, from most Men. And though real Christians will in no Way revenge your Treatment of them, but join Pity for you with their Uneasiness at your Discourse; this surely is no Reason, why you should give them that Uneasiness; and much less, why you should purposely single them out

ⁿ Psal. xlvii. 7.

to feel it, as I fear is sometimes done. But indeed such Conversation must be offensive to all in general, who have any Consideration, either of good Sense or Agreeableness. It is irrational, it is absurd, it excites Images that are shocking, it makes Men appear like Devils, to bring Death, and Hell, and eternal Damnation, into every Sentence, let the Subject of Discourse be what it will. As for the Excuse, that these Phrases are so familiar, that they make no Impression, raise no Ideas; there was a Time at least, nor could it be a short one, when they did: and in Proportion, as the Meaning of such Words is thus effaced and lost, I doubt all Concern about the Things, that once were meant, is effaced and lost too; and Solicitude to obtain everlasting Happiness, or escape everlasting Misery, worn out of Men's Hearts. Yet still, God be thanked, there are some remaining, to whom profane Language carries its original Terror: and, for their Sakes, if for no other Reason, it ought to be avoided. But far from that, they themselves, who alledge this Plea of its being insignificant, seldom fail to confute it, by inventing new Oaths and Curses, as fast as ever they can, to alarm and awe those that hear them, for fear the old ones should have lost the Power of doing it.

And thus their Language becomes every Day more and more diabolical; till such Kind of Expressions make up perhaps near Half of what some of them say. Now were each of these Offences, taken singly, much lighter than it is; yet how enormous a Weight of Sin must the incessant Repetition of them amount to, in the Course of a Man's Life; and how heavy may it press on his Conscience, when he comes to die! Then besides, it is a Crime of public Scandal, and bad Example: you may lead great Numbers of others into it, or encourage them in it; your Acquaintance, your Friends, your Servants, your Children; may contribute largely to their Ruin, and share deeply in their Guilt. Nay, you may contribute, much more than you think of, to the Increase of other Wickednesses too; and, by Consequence, towards bringing down the Judgments of God upon your Country. For, let some think as slightly as they will of taking his Name in vain, it is a notorious Fact, that all Manner of Crimes grow common and bare-faced along with it: and therefore in Proportion as that increases amongst any People, they gradually ripen for Destruction. Accordingly we find the Prophet *Jeremiah* declaring expressly, that *because of swearing the land mourneth*°.

° Jer. xxiii. 10.

And *Hosea* puts down that, in the first Place, as the leading Sin of those many, for which the Lord had a Controversy with the Children of Israel. By swearing, and lying, and stealing, and committing Adultery they break out, and Blood toucheth Blood. Therefore shall the Land mourn; and every one, that dwelleth therein, shall languish ^p. May God in his Mercy give us Grace to turn ourselves from all our Transgressions, that so Iniquity may not be our Ruin ^q.

^p Hof. iv. 1, 2, 3.

^q Ezek. xviii. 30.

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Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain : for the Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his Name in vain.

IN discoursing on these Words, after laying before you the Nature and Guilt of Perjury, I proceeded to treat of rash and needless Oaths and Imprecations : concerning which I have shewn,

I. That the mere Prohibition of Scripture is alone sufficient Obligation to abstain from them : and yet

II. That the Wisdom and Goodness of God in forbidding them is evident ; as they are plainly inconsistent with a Sense of Piety and Reverence towards him, with the Support of Truth and Justice in the World, with a Behaviour of Humanity and common Decency.

These Things being proved, there may seem to be little Need of saying any Thing further concerning this Sin. But as too many are apt to think, either that Christian Preachers are led by Prejudice to dress it up in false Terrors, or that whatever Objections there may be against it, there are likewise considerable Pleas to be made in its Favour; or, at least, that in certain Circumstances Men cannot abstain from it: I beg your Attention once more to the Subject, whilst I prove,

III. That others, as well as Christians, have condemned common Swearing.

IV. That the Pleas, alledged for it, are of no Weight.

V. That, by observing a few plain Directions, Men may both avoid it, and even cure themselves and others of it.

III. In speaking to the third Head, I might properly remind you of what I mentioned in the first Discourse on this Subject, that the old *Jewish* Teachers condemned Oaths, almost as strongly as our Saviour himself: nay, that *Solomon* hath set down the Character of *him that sweareth* as a bad one; and of *him that feareth an Oath*, as a good one ^a. But some may pos-

^a Eccl. ix. 2.

sibly except against Authorities from these Writers ; as being of a Religion too near akin to our own. Therefore none shall be quoted but Heathens. And though their very Poets ^b and Orators ^c, as well as Lawgivers and Philosophers, have delivered Rules, agreeable to those of Scripture, on this Point ; I shall produce only some of the latter. *Rhadamanthus*, the *Cretan* Legislator forbid all Swearing directly by the Name of God, to preserve it from Profanation ^d. To reverence an Oath, is a well known Precept of the famous *Pythagoras* ^e. And the Philosopher *Hierocles*, in his Commentary upon it, hath the following Words. *This Precept requires Men, not only to speak Truth when they swear, but to abstain from Swearing : not to use Oaths frequently, and rashly, and about Trifles, to fill up a Sentence, or confirm a common Story. For so shall we observe Truth in our Oaths, if we be sparing of them : But from frequent Swearing to false Swearing, is an easy Fall. Plato directs that Men do not on slight Occasions name God ; and scarce on any swear by him* ^f. *Avoid Oaths*, saith *Epietetus* ^g, *if it be possible, intirely : but*

^b *Chærilus* and *Menander* in *Grot.* on *Matth.* v. 34. ^c *Isoc.* ad *Demonic.* ^d See Note ^k on *Serm.* XII. on *Oaths*, p. 236. ^e *Aur. Carm.* 2. *Diog. Laert.* also gives this amongst his Doctrines. *Diod. Sic. Excerpt.* l. 6. p. 555. saith, that *Pythagoras* παρηγγειλε τοις μαθηταῖσι σπανίως μὲν οἴσθαι, χρῆσασθαι δὲ τοῖς ὅρκοις πάντως ἐμμελεῖν. ^f *De Legibus*, L. xi. ^g *Ench.* c. 33.

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if not, to the utmost of your Power. An Oath, saith his Commentator Simplicius, is calling God to witness, and making him a Voucher to what we say. Now to introduce God on little and insignificant Occasions, expresses a Contempt of him. The earliest of these Men were certainly under none of the Prepossession, which it may be fancied we are : and though such of them, as lived after Christ, are much the most explicit and the strongest in condemning all needless Oaths, and therefore may be supposed to have learnt their Dislike of them from Believers in him ; yet this only shews, that though they opposed Christianity in general, they were forced to confess the Excellency of its Doctrine in this Particular, and to adopt it. For they say most exactly the same Things, that we do : nor can any one Writer, of any Nation upon Earth, be produced, that ever said the contrary. All the Authority therefore, as well as all the Reason in the World, bears Testimony to the Fitness and Importance of God's Command in this Matter : and what Pleas can there be on the other Side, to excuse our Disobedience ? Let us proceed

IV. To consider them.

Some perhaps may imagine, that Oaths procure Credit to what they say. But are any more credited,

credited, than those, who never swear in their Discourse at all? or any less, than those, who swear every Moment? This is the Way to lower and destroy, not raise, your Credit. For it seems to imply a voluntary Acknowledgement, on your own Part, that your mere Affirmation is unworthy of Regard. You know best indeed, whether it deserves Belief or not. But if it doth, you are very unwise to add more. It is considered, as no small Privilege, allowed to the Rank of some Persons, that their Assertion is admitted without an Oath, in legal Proceedings on Matters of great Moment. Why should not you partake of that Privilege, as far as you can? Why will you degrade yourself needlessly? If your bare Word be in Truth a sufficient Security; keep up the Honour of it; and reserve additional Confirmations for Occasions of high Importance, for such as seldom happen, and where an Oath is indispensable. By making them common in every Case, you lose the Advantage of them in extraordinary Cases. It is the Character which Men preserve, not merely the Form of Words which they use, that must give Weight to what they say. And if your Character be sunk; till you raise it again by a right Behaviour, all other Ways to gain Credit will

will have very little Effect. You may join if you will, the Sin of Swearing with that of Lying; but no one will suspect you the less of the latter, for hearing you guilty of the former. You may try to cloke Falsehood with Perjury: but you will soon be detected, and doubly abhorred: whereas if you will learn to speak Truth, you will never need Oaths. But indeed they who make this Plea, very often swear and curse, just as freely, in Cases, where they cannot make it: in saying what no one doubts; in Matters not of Fact, but of speculative Opinion; or Matters depending, not on their Testimony, but that of others; nay sometimes, in the very asking of a Question.

Instead of this Excuse therefore, a different one is invented; that where this Kind of Language is not wanted to gain Belief, at least it commands Respect. But is any one, in Reality, ever the better thought of for it; or the worse for Want of it? Did you ever hear it said, or intimated, that such a one was a Man of no Understanding, or no Honour, or no Consequence, because he was never known to swear; or was a Person of singular Worth and Importance, because he had a greater Plenty and Variety of Oaths, than other Men? What sort of
Respect

Respect must it be then, that such Phrases can procure you? Perhaps you hope to appear terrible by the Use of them. But where is the Need of appearing so? It should rather be the Care of reasonable Creatures, to appear mild, and humane, and agreeable to each other. It is true, Men in some Stations must carry Awe with them: but this is not the Way to it. Swearing frights none, but those whom it is unmanly to fright: and the Affectation of giving much Terror, is a well-known Mark, and commonly, though not always, a true one, of little Courage. All the threatening Imprecations in the World can only shew, that he who uses them, is an angry Man, or would seem so: but as his Anger is not in the least of more Consequence, with them, than without them; so it may be shewn full as effectually without them, as with them. Nay, very often, such as would submit upon a moderate and decent Reproof, are exasperated by the Outrage of being sworn at; and it may be, provoked to return the Language they receive: in which Case, all that Superiors get by it, is, teaching their Inferiors to curse them to their Faces; and throwing down the Distinction they meant to keep up. Some indeed are so used to pour out Oaths, on all considerable

considerable Occasions, that they are little minded if they do not : but then they are commonly so used to it, upon inconsiderable ones also, that they are not much more minded, if they do. Or however that be, as this pretended Necessity of Swearing arises wholly from a Habit of Swearing without Necessity ; your having been guilty already can never justify your becoming more so. But your plain Way is, leave off these wrong Methods of making yourself attended to, and apply diligently to the right ones : and after a while, one calm Word of Command or Direction will go a great deal farther, than ever so much Bluster and Blasphemy did before. At first indeed you may be under Difficulties ; but as your preceding Transgressions of your Duty have brought them upon you, you must bear them with Patience. Or supposing, that not you, but others before you, have so accustomed those, with whom you are concerned, to this Language, that they will not easily be kept in Order without it : still, which of the two is fitter ; that you should deliberately go on to violate the Laws of God, and set all around you an Example of it, merely to procure yourself more speedy Regard from the Profligate ; or that you should keep yourself innocent, and reform

form them ; the Effect of which will be, double Honour from them for the future ? But after all, the real Truth is, that this Plea of commanding Respect, as well as the former of gaining Belief, is, generally speaking, mere Pretence : and they who alledge them, swear just as much, when they know they shall get neither.

But there is a third Inducement to it, which though not often mentioned perhaps, appears to have, with many, great Weight ; an Opinion of its recommending them to the World, as being above precise Restraints, of a lively Conversation, and graceful Behaviour. Now it must be acknowledged, that a free Use of Oaths will help to acquit them from the Imputation of having any Religion. Not that Men are by any Means always so fearless of their Maker, as they give themselves Airs of being. And it is surely the lowest of Affectations, to make false Pretences to a Character, which, if it really belonged to them, could only dishonour them. For why they should, any of them, meet with more Regard from Men, for having no Regard to God and no Restraints on their Behaviour, but what they may boldly throw off, when it serves a present Turn ; this is beyond all Comprehension. Observe too, that as it is wicked, for

Believers

Believers in Religion to swear needlessly ; so it is absurd, for Unbelievers to swear at all ; and very dishonest also, to offer an Oath for the Confirmation of what they say, when they themselves must look upon it to be no Confirmation in the least. As for the Notion that Oaths give a Life and Spirit to Discourse ; it must be confessed, that the whole Spirit of some Mens Conversation consists in the Profaneness of it : and to refuse them full Scope in the only Thing they have to be admired for, may seem ill-natured. But then it is so very easy to procure all the Admiration, that Swearing can give ; an Attainment, which the meanest and stupidest of human Creatures possess often in a supreme Degree ; that one would think it should not be mightily coveted. If this be all you have to make a Figure with, you will make a very poor one. And if you have any Thing better to value yourself upon, trust to that : and leave such as have no other, to shine with so cheap an Accomplishment ; which indeed, of all the Follies that ever made any Man's Conversation despicable and disagreeable, is the very greatest. And to see it in this Light ; suppose a Dialogue were written down, as full of these Ornaments, as some Peoples Discourse is, and you were to read it

it over; what should you think of it? Not only the Practice in general would appear monstrously void of all Decency and Propriety, but the very Forms and Terms made use of errant gross Nonsense. Still, some common Swearers may, in other Respects, be Men of good Understanding and good Breeding; but their Faults must not be taken for Excellencies; much less will they look becoming, when copied: and surely their Oaths are disgusting, for still further Reasons. The assuming Air and Vehemence, that is inseparable from them, expresses much Incivility and Disrespect. You never bear them from your Inferiors on that very Account. And yet, if it be such graceful Language, why should not your Children and Servants accost you with it, on all Occasions? But plainly, as long as the Phrases of this Kind have any Meaning, they have a shocking one: and when they have none they are mere Impertinence; which was never in any other Case, accounted a Beauty. Suppose you were to use in your Discourse as many harmless Expletives, as you do of these profane ones; would not you be ridiculous, even to a Proverb? And yet there are not only no Words, but no insignificant or inarticulate Sounds and Noises, but might, with just as much Sense and Elegance, be brought into every Part of your

Conversation, as the Oaths you are so fond of. And surely adding Impiety to Absurdity, cannot make it less Absurdity. One would hope, their being forbidden is not the Reason why you delight in them. If it be; think only, what a deliberate Disobedience to God, and Defiance of his Authority, that implies. And if it be not, what Motive can you have, to let such ugly Excrescences deform your Talk?

But some alledge, in the fourth Place, that whether becoming or not, it is the Fashion however, and that must be followed. But though much too common, it is by no Means universal. There are, God be thanked, great Numbers innocent of it, yet well esteemed in the World, and the more for their Innocence, by all whose Esteem is worth having; and so may you. But were the Exceptions fewer; must you needs prefer the Customs of the World before all common Sense, before the Dictates of your Conscience, before the Commands of your Maker? Think a little of the Matter. And remember too, the World hath many other bad Customs. Is it your Intention then, to comply with them all, and be completely profligate? If not why do you comply with this? Other Sins you may be inticed and persuaded into; but no

one I presume, will take much Pains in pressing you to Curse and Swear. And if the Practice be looked on by some with too much Indulgence, it is looked upon by none with Esteem. Such Language may perhaps, in former Days, long ago, have been one Distinction of the upper Part of the World: and truly one, that did them little Credit, even then: but now, the very lowest of Mankind are grown to be so thoroughly their Match at it; and the most vulgar Mouths have this whole Set of Phrases in such continual Use; that it is high Time for well bred Men to have done with them. But above all, the most distant Advances, towards any Sort of Profaneness in Discourse, should be scrupulously avoided by that Sex, which cannot yet plead any established Custom for it; and whose Esteem from the other depends so very greatly on the Gentleness and Delicacy of their Conversation, that they will be far from finding their Account, (whatever they may fancy) in exchanging it for a confident Behaviour, and offensive Expressions of masculine Boldness.

But fifthly; some have yet a different Plea to make. It is not the Practice of the World that they insist on; but Swearing is unhappily become their own Practice: and long Habit hath

made it quite familiar to them, and a Thing of Course. What you urge therefore, in Alleviation of your Crime, is, that you have been for very many Years very constantly guilty of it. And is not this, on the contrary, one of the greatest Aggravations, that can be? Suppose you had lived, as perhaps you have, in the habitual Commission of several other Sins besides; is that a Reason, why you should go on with them all, and be easy about them; or a strong Reason, why you should be deeply concerned for them, and set in Earnest to amend without Delay? But you can alledge, it may be, that you learnt it before you knew the Harm of it; and indeed were taught it by the Example of those, who should have taught you better Things. Why, undoubtedly their setting you such a Pattern was some Excuse for you at first: but your following it to this Day, and setting others the same, is void of all Excuse. And what do you mean to do in the Case? You will not say, that you never design to reform; but will indulge yourself, to your dying Hour, in what God hath forbidden you. And if not, do you expect, that what Custom hath made hard to leave off, longer Custom will make easy? When shall you do it, if not now? But, very probably, you have one
Thing

Thing farther to plead on this Head : that you scarce know when you swear. And supposing this true, what doth it prove, but how great and old a Sinner, in this Way, you have been ? Men may accustom themselves to many Faults, and those very gross ones, till, at last they commit them without reflecting upon it almost at all. But do you think, they may safely commit them for that Reason ; or, that they ought to mind better what they do ? And observe, a Habit of Swearing is the less excusable on this Account : because there is nothing in our Frame, that originally tempts us to it. Other Sins are deeply rooted in the Constitution of Man ; have much Pleasure and Profit, at least great Appearances of it, frequently attending them : profane Language hath neither. Still, we are not to indulge even the Vices, that are born with us : but much less one, to which Nature doth not prompt us ; and which therefore we may, if we will, very easily, both avoid at first, and lay aside afterwards. A little Attention is almost the whole we need for the Cure : and surely our Maker hath a Right to this from us. The greatest Swearer that ever was, can abstain from Oaths in the Presence of those, before whom he thinks them improper ; and can expect, that his Inferiors should abstain from

them in his Presence, be they ever so much addicted to them. Why then is not the Presence of God to be equally revered? And what Impossibility is there, of paying as great a Regard to him, as we do to one another? The Force of Habit therefore, though a powerful Motive to beware of falling into this Sin, is no Argument at all for continuing in it.

There is yet remaining a sixth, and the last Plea I shall mention, made by some for themselves, that they do not swear commonly; scarce ever indeed, but when they are provoked, and Passion gets the better of them. Now this, it must be owned, is a strong Temptation, and therefore they hope no small Excuse. But consider: it is only Custom which hath made it a Temptation: a Person, who had not learnt to swear at such Times, would never think of it. Besides, is every one to be excused for doing every Thing that his Passions tempt him to? We have many other Passions, as well as Anger, that tempt us to do Ill. If one makes a Sin excusable, why not another? And where shall we stop? But even as to this Passion; suppose a Murderer should plead, that he never killed a Man in cold Blood, but only when he was angry; would this avail him? When Men are
moved

moved by Resentment, are they to give it full Scope? are they to vent it in every Way they please? especially in such Ways, as must increase it? For were you desirous to excite Rage within yourself to the very utmost, what could you do more effectual, than blow up the Flame by vehement Oaths and Imprecations? You find therefore, that St. *James*, writing to Persons, who suffered under very provoking ill Usage, gives them particularly this Caution: *But above all Things, my Brethren, Swear not*^h. Undoubtedly, being surprized by sudden Warmth, and hurried at once into a Sin, is some Mitigation of it. But you cannot say you are surprized into what you are constantly ready to practise, as often as any Incitement to it comes in your Way. Instead therefore of seeking Excuses for doing Wrong in this Matter; seek, what are the best Means to enable you to do Right. And for your Assistance in it, I now proceed to the

V. Head proposed: which was to give some plain Directions for the Prevention or Cure of this great Fault.

And, in the first Place, to avoid Swearing in Anger, avoid being in Anger: keep your Temper even and composed, by all the Considera-

^h James v. 12.

tions, that Reason and Religion can suggest. Or, if you cannot help being ruffled, and feel that improper Expressions are struggling for Utterance, oblige yourself to Silence; utter nothing at all, turn aside, and quit the Company for a while, if there be Need: for thus, in all Likelihood, you will escape more Sins and Dangers, than one. But, to secure you farther at all Times: Recollect frequently what you have heard and read and been convinced of, concerning this Practice; the Impiety, the Mischievousness, the Indecency, the Contemptibleness of it; with the utter Vanity of the Excuses alledged for it. But above all, possess your Heart with a serious Regard to God: think of him often and reverently; and you will soon cease, to mention him irreverently. Have it ready upon your Mind; he, that hath said, *Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain*, hath said also, *The Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his Name in vain*: he that hath said, *Swear not at all*ⁱ, hath said also, *If thou wilt enter into Life, keep the Commandments*^k. Further yet: Abstain, as much as possible, from all Company, that will set you the Example of profane Language: and be as-

ⁱ Matth. v. 34.^k Matth. xix. 17.

sured,

ured, that keeping yourself innocent in this Respect will by no Means be the only Benefit you will receive from that Caution. But if you must converse with such, be doubly on your Guard before them; and if they attempt to ridicule your Strictness, give your Reasons, where there is Hope of doing Good: where there is none, endeavour to turn the Discourse, and hear as little upon the Subject, as you can: but what you must hear, bear it mildly, and resolutely. One should think, it might suffice Men to dishonour God themselves, without driving others, by Scoffs and Railleries, to do it against their Will. But if such Treatment doth befall you; remember always, what your Lord and Master hath declared: *Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my Words, in this adulterous and sinful Generation; of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he cometh in the Glory of his Father with the holy Angels*¹. But *whosoever shall confess me before Men, him will I confess also before my Father, which is in Heaven*^m. At the same Time, endeavour to shelter yourself under the Protection, and good Counsel, of some prudent and serious Friend. Surely you are not so unhappy, as to have none. If you are, it is high

¹ Mark viii. 38.^m Matth. x. 32.

Time you made one. Let him encourage, and watch over, your Innocence; let him remonstrate to you, if you become guilty. And in that Case, acknowledge your Sense of the Fault before any fit Persons, that hear you commit it; authorize them to remind you of it: these Things will tie you down to avoid it. Or, if more be needful, lay a Penalty upon yourself for each Offence: do some Act of Mortification, or of Charity, to fix the Sense of your Transgression deeper in your Mind. And make it a Rule, to abstain, not only from the more shocking Sort of Oaths and Imprecations, but from palliating them under silly Disguises; or using others in their Stead, that are gentler: for besides that they will lead you to worse, they are bad in themselves. Our Saviour you know expressly forbids swearing *by Heaven, by the Earth*, by any of the pretended harmless Forms: and gives a Reason for it, which a Heathen Writer, who lived after him, gives too; that tho' none of them named God, they all of them referred to himⁿ. They can have no other Sense: and he will understand them in this. Indeed Expressions, which taken strictly may not be Oaths,

ⁿ *Ulpian* saith, that they who use such Forms, *respectu divini nominis jurant.*

yet, if they bear the Resemblance of Oaths, ought to be shunned, as *Appearances of Evil* °: for whoever goes as near, as he can, towards Sin; will seldom fail of making one Step farther, and falling into it. Nay, any careless, and especially ludicrous Mention of God in Discourse, be it ever so remote from Swearing, is undeniably *taking his Name in vain*: and irreverent Conversation about any Part of Religion, or any Thing connected with it, always brings on some Degree of Disregard to its ever blessed Author and Object.

When once, by these or better Directions, you have reformed yourself; you may hope for Success in the farther Duty of preserving others innocent: which till then you will attempt with an exceeding ill Grace. And surely it must be a mortifying Situation, that Men dare not blame their very Children for Swearing, because the Reproof would fly back into their own Faces. It is reported indeed, that there are Parents, who can rejoice in their Children's giving this early Proof of Manliness. And truly they had Need rejoice while they can. For such an Education will soon bring forth other Fruits, besides this, that will turn their Mirth into Heaviness

° 1 Theff. v. 22.

enough.

enough. And then they will exclaim, and pretend to wonder, that the poor Wretches come out to be, what they have made them. Such, as would be happy in their Children, must lay a Foundation for it early. And if to conduct them right, it be necessary to reform the rest of your Family, and yourselves too, it is only a double Reason for doing so, instead of an Objection against it.

But indeed most, if not all Men, may go, at least occasionally, much farther; and check profane Language in other Places, besides their own Homes. A mere Look of Surprize, Disapprobation, or Sorrow, on hearing it, will often have a great Effect. And without the least Violation of good Manners, but treating those with much Regard, who are pleased to treat God with none, various Methods may be found of sometimes plainly declaring, sometimes obliquely intimating, the manifold Wrongness of such Expressions. There is indeed one Thing, that would seem to be of this Kind, and hath a contrary Effect: I mean, when Swearers are chid absolutely in Jest; in a Way, that makes it visible, they are not in the least worse thought of; and they perhaps carry on the Jest, by begging Pardon of the Company, and doing the
same

same Thing again the next Minute; without having it once brought to their Thoughts, that they have Cause either to beg Pardon of God, or be ashamed of themselves. Such a Farce of Reproof encourages, instead of discountenancing, the Sin. But a real and serious Dislike, shewn with Discretion, and requisite Mildness, may do incredible Service, to young Offenders above all. And therefore, whoever wishes well to his Acquaintance and Friends, to Religion and Virtue; especially, whoever hath any peculiar Ground to hope he may have Weight; should conscientiously make use of every Opportunity for promoting right Behaviour, in this and all Respects: knowing, that *he, who converteth a Sinner from the Error of his Way, shall save a Soul from Death, and shall hide a Multitude of Sins* ^P.

^P James v. 20.

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S E R M O N X V I .

GAL. v. 24.

*And they, that are Christ's, have crucified the
Flesh, with the Affections and Lusts.*

THIS Expression, *Crucifying the Flesh*, may probably seem to most, when they first hear it, or attend to it, a very strange one: as, no doubt, Numbers of others in Scripture do. But a little Consideration will shew, that there is no Cause to censure them, or be offended at them. For amidst the Multiplicity of Languages, that are in the World, and the various Notions, Tempers and Circumstances, of the People who are bred up to use them; it is unavoidable, but there will be in each many Ways of speaking, which though easy and familiar by Custom to one Part of Mankind, must yet, to the Rest, appear harsh and unaccountable.

able. This is the Case even of neighbouring Countries in our own Times : much more then must it be expected in those Tongues, of which the vulgar Use hath long since failed, and which formerly expressed the Sentiments of distant Nations, inspired both by the Age and the Climate they lived in, with a different Turn of Thought and Stile. Hence proceeds the surprizing Warmth and Boldness of Figure, the abrupt Transitions, the sudden lofty Flights of the Eastern Writers and Speakers, utterly contrary to the cool and regular Genius of the *European* Languages. And amongst the former, the Compositions of the *Jews* must of Course have a peculiar Tincture and Propriety of their own : not only because they were prohibited, for good Reasons, all needless Commerce with other Lands ; but chiefly because divine Revelation delivered to them such Doctrines and Precepts, and consequently such Terms, as the Heathen had not ; which must likewise greatly increase in Number by frequent References to their own Articles of Faith, Observances and sacred Books. When Christianity was published to the World, here was again a new Set of Discoveries and Ideas, added to the preceding : which being first communicated in *Hebrew*,
were

were thence transfused into *Greek*, by the Apostles addressing themselves to the Gentiles. Thus was the Stile of the New Testament produced : which being as literally translated, and closely imitated, as it well could, (for the Nature of the Thing required Strictness) the same Forms of Speech have been derived down into the modern Tongues of Christian Countries. And so it hath come to pass by a kind of Necessity, that, in Discourses on Religion, Words, Meanings, Constructions, Images, occur, extremely remote from the common Idiom of the Language on other Occasions. And these, weak Persons are apt to mistake, artful Disputants to pervert, and unlearned or unfair Affecters of Wit and free Thought to ridicule ; though originally they were of plain Signification, and are still, when understood, full of good Sense and Beauty.

Thus, *Crucifying*, or as the Apostle elsewhere puts it, *Mortifying* ^a the Flesh, is a Phrase far out of the Road of our daily Conversation, and of our Reading on Subjects of Business and Entertainment : from whence it easily happens, that the Superstitious misapprehend, and the Profane despise it ; though indeed it denotes a reasonable, a

^a Col. iii. 5.

necessary Duty, and describes that Duty, not only in a strong, but elegant Manner. To shew these Things clearly, I shall

I. Explain to you the Rise and general Intention of this Way of speaking.

II. Specify more distinctly the Nature of the Duty designed to be taught by it.

III. Shew you how strictly our belonging to Christ obliges us to practise that Doctrine.

I. I shall explain to you the Rise and general Intention of this Way of speaking in Scripture.

Now the Words, *Flesh* and *Spirit*, though employed by the Writers of the New Testament in different Senses, according to the Subject of which they treat, are yet commonly Expressions of the moral State and Character of Man; the Dispositions of his Heart towards Piety or Sin. *Spirit* is the Principle of Reason and Religion: *Flesh* of Appetite and Passion. Every one feels in himself both right and wrong Inclinations. The former our Conscience approves. And therefore pursuing them would on that Account alone be properly called, *Walking after the Spirit*^b, that *inward Man*, which naturally *delighteth in the Law of God*^c. But a much stronger Ground for it is, that the

^b Rom. viii. 4.

^c Rom. vii. 22.

Divine Spirit hath not only revealed to us the whole Rule of Life, and the most powerful Motives to observe it, but is continually present to our Minds, exciting and strengthening us, if we permit him, to every good Work. On the other Hand, *all Flesh having corrupted his Way before God* *, Sinners may be justly said to *walk after the Flesh*, because they live conformably to the wicked Customs of the World. But the true Foundation of the Phrase is, that this *corruptible Body* † subjects the fallen Children of *Adam* perpetually by its irregular Propensities, to a Variety of Temptations, hard to be overcome. And therefore even Heathen Authors have represented it, as the principal Source of moral Evil: no wonder then, that those of Scripture do, on fuller Knowledge of the Case.

But in *St. Paul* more especially the *Flesh* means our vicious Tendencies; not only those to sensual Indulgence, but the whole System of them. Thus Ver. 13. of this Chapter: *Brethren, ye have been called unto Liberty; only use not your Liberty for an Occasion to the Flesh*: that is, to any blameable Purpose. But the particular blameable Use, which he had in View, was that of uncharitable Contention. For it

* Gen. vi. 11, 12:

† Wisd. ix. 15.

follows immediately, *But if ye bite and devour one another, take Heed that ye be not consumed one of another.* Again, Ver. 19. having said, that *the Works of the Flesh are manifest*, he proceeds to reckon amongst them, not only *Adultery and Lasciviousness*, but *Variance, Envy, Strife, Sedition.* And the *Fruits of the Spirit*, opposed to these, Ver. 22. are not only *Temperance*, but *Long-suffering, Peace, Goodness, Faith, or Fidelity, Meekness.*

Farther: because there is a Connexion and Sympathy between the various Dispositions of the same Kind, whether moral or immoral, each adding Vigour and Strength to the other: the several Vices, to which Mankind is prone, are described in God's Word, as uniting into and forming a living Body, hence denominated *the Body of Sin*, or of *the Lusts of the Flesh*^a; of which every criminal Inclination is a Member. Thus, when the Apostle had enjoined Christians to *mortify their Members, which are upon the Earth*^e, he instantly explains himself to mean the Parts of this figurative Body of Sin, which he goes on to enumerate: *Covetousness, Anger, Fornication, Uncleaness, Malice, Blasphemy.*

^a Col. ii. 11.^e Col. iii. 5.

And,

And, in Consequence of this, because not only the Nature of all Men is tainted originally, but the Conduct of most Men hath, in some Respects at least, been habitually unjustifiable; therefore the Sins, which they have indulged, considered in the Manner above mentioned, as united into one organized Body, are also stiled in Scripture, *the old Man*; in Opposition to that *new Man*, or blessed Change of Temper and Behaviour, which the Gospel was designed to produce. And however singular the former of these Phrases may appear; the latter, which in itself is equally so, that of becoming a new Man, is both frequent in our common Speech, and warranted by the politest of classical Authors.

This Expression therefore having taken Place, the Amendment of our Hearts and Actions is sometimes denoted by laying aside or *putting off this old Man*. Thus Eph. iv. 22. *That ye put off, concerning the former Conversation, the old Man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful Lusts; and put on the new Man, which is created according to God, that is, according to the Image of God, in Righteousness and true Holiness.* And because our gracious Redeemer was a perfect Example of these, putting on the new Man is elsewhere called, *putting on the Lord*

Jesus Christ ^f: a Mode of Speech fully vindicated by the ancient Usage of the *Greek* Tongue, in which the New Testament was written. For in that, *putting on any Person* signified, forming ones self by his Character, and imitating his Manner.

At other Times, this intire Change of Affections, Will, and Demeanour, is expressed more strongly. We are said to *be dead to Sin*, and *raised up again to walk in Newness of Life* ^g: which means, to be separated for ever from bad Habits and Customs, and enter into a different State, and Course, of thinking and acting; in which *the former Things are passed away, and all Things are made new* ^h. The Promises indeed, of this Renovation on our Part, and of Grace to accomplish it, and future Happiness to reward it, on God's Part, are first made in Baptism: which therefore the Scripture ⁱ calls our new Birth to this new Life. But then, it is only by continual Care, (if Providence allows us Time) to grow in Grace, and become every Day more completely dead to all Transgression, and alive to all Duty, that we shall arrive at the Maturity, requisite for our Acceptance.

^f Rom. xiii. 14. Gal. iii. 27.
xvi. 4, 5.

ⁱ John iii. 3—7.

^g Rom. vi. 2, 4.

^h Rev.

Farther yet : when the Word of God intends to give us the most awakening Sense, how intire our Change must be, and with how unremitted a Resolution we must arm ourselves against every bad Inclination ; then the Expression chosen is, not that of dying to Sin, but of *mortifying*, killing it. For the original Signification of the Words, translated, *mortify*, is not the now common one, of keeping under, and treating with some Austerity, but of destroying, putting to Death : as where the Apostle saith, *If through the Spirit ye do mortify the Deeds of the Body, unlawful Indulgences, ye shall live* ^k ; and in the Passage already cited, *mortify therefore your Members, which are upon the Earth*. In Pursuance of which mortal Enmity between Religion and Wickedness, every serious Believer considers himself as a *Soldier of Christ* ^l, whose whole Life is to be a Warfare against those *Lusts which war against the Soul* ^m.

And lastly, because the great End of our Saviour's Incarnation and Death was to engage us in this good Fight, and enable us to obtain the Victory ; therefore overcoming and sacrificing to him our unlawful Desires, is, by an elegant Allusion to the Manner of his Death, (which was painful and slow, like our Extirpa-

^k Rom. viii. 13.

^l 2 Tim. ii. 3, 4.

^m 1 Pet. ii. 11.

tion of them) called *Crucifying* them; not only here in the Text, but in another parallel one; *Knowing this, that our old Man is crucified with him, that the Body of Sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve Sin*ⁿ. Whence also our Apostle faith farther, that *by the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*, by the Example of his Sufferings, and the Grace which they have procured, *the World is crucified unto him, and he unto the World*^o. He regards it no more, than the *Jews* did our Saviour, when they condemned him to the most ignominious Torments, but hates it mortally, and despises it utterly, so far as it is sinful: and is content, that, in return, it should hate and despise him, rather than comply with its wicked Customs.

This then is the true Christian Mortification. And the Figures, describing it, are indeed remarkably bold and full of Energy: but they are accurate, instructive, animating; and alas, but too necessary, to convince unthinking and unwilling Creatures, as we are, (prone to explain away into nothing every Precept we can) of the Zeal and Severity, with which we are to extirpate all that is faulty within our Souls. The Commands of our Blessed Lord himself carry in them the same Force: *If our right*

* Rom. vi. 6.

^o Gal. vi. 14.

Hand offends us, to cut it off; if our right Eye, to pluck it out ^p: if any Desire we feel, will be a probable Occasion of our falling, to suppress it, however dear; if any Action we are engaged in, to quit it, however advantageous in other Respects. And the Reason he adds, admits of no Reply. *It is better for thee to enter into Life maimed, than having two Hands or two Eyes, to be cast into Hell-Fire*: it is better to undergo the most painful Self-Denial here, and be recompensed with heavenly Felicity hereafter; than to enjoy the *Pleasures of Sin for a Season* ^q, and suffer the Vengeance of the Almighty for ever.

Having now explained the Rise and general Intention of the principal Phrases of this Sort in Scripture, I proceed

II. To specify more distinctly the Nature of the Duty designed to be taught by them.

And here you cannot fail to perceive at first Sight, that harsh Treatment of our bodily Frame, only for the sake of treating it harshly, is no Part of Christian Mortification, or Christian Duty. It is indeed a Practice contrary to Reason, and no less to Scripture. For St. Paul saith, *no Man*, that is, no wise Man, *ever hated*

^p Matth. v. 29, 30. xviii. 8, 9. Mark ix. 43, 45, 47. ^q Heb. xi. 25.

his own Flesh ^r. Yet the Opinion, that such Things are in themselves acceptable to God, hath not only been common in false Religions, but crept into the true : and both furnished Unbelievers with an Objection against it, and misled Believers very unhappily. For they, who fancy, that exercising Rigour on their Persons hath any Good in it, separate from the good Uses to which it may contribute, are some of them led to fancy also, that the farther they carry it the better ; till they hurt, perhaps ruin, their Healths, disorder their Understandings, or however sour their Tempers : while others conceive, that there is very great Merit, in a very little Suffering ; and consequently persuade themselves, that God will readily excuse the smaller Faults of a Behaviour not quite so moral as it should be, on their punctual Performance of these higher Duties, as they esteem them ; though, in Truth, not only imaginary, but often of little more than imaginary Hardship. And thus, whereas common Sinners are open to Remorse of Conscience, which there is Hope may, sooner or later, through the Grace of God, amend them : these, on the contrary, proceed Self-applauded, and fully persuaded of their

^r Eph. v. 29.

Title to a distinguished Share of Divine Favour. On which account our Saviour tells the Pharisees, Men of Austerity in some Respects, and wonderful Exactness in little Matters, that *the Publicans and the Harlots shall go into the Kingdom of Heaven before them* ^s.

Not that Christians, of more abstemious Lives than ordinary, are therefore to be condemned as Pharisees and Hypocrites; or derided, as weak and superstitious. Every one is bound to employ such Means for his Preservation from Sin, and Advancement in Piety and Virtue, as either God's Word hath prescribed, or his own Reason and Experience recommend. Now some may find Rules to be useful or necessary, which to others would be neither. Some again may rashly censure what they would do much better to imitate. And all Persons, but especially all who live in Ease and Plenty, should be attentive to *keep their Bodies in Subjection* ^t: not harassing them as Enemies, but ruling and providing for them as Servants, in such Manner as to make them both willing to obey, and able to perform their Work. They should watch over their natural Fondness for Pleasure, and Tendency to follow the Customs of the World; not with

^s Matth. xxi. 31.

^t 1 Cor. ix. 27.

unreasonable Scrupulousness, but with religious Prudence : learn to suspect their favourite Inclinations, and the Opinions that countenance them : check themselves in proportion as they grow eager, stop and look round them with Care: never adventure to the Extremity of what is lawful, but in all dubious Cases lean to the undoubtedly safer Side : be moderate in the most allowable Gratifications of this World, and delight principally in cultivating and improving those pious and virtuous Affections, which alone can *make them meet to be Partakers of the Inheritance of the Saints in Light* ^u; of a Happiness intirely spiritual, and abstracted from Flesh and Blood.

But then, while we observe this Caution in regard to worldly Objects, we must be careful also, on the other Hand, that we carry it not to dangerous or extravagant Lengths; that we seem not unthankful to, or suspicious of him, *who hath given us richly all Things to enjoy* ^w; that we disguise not Religion by putting it in a melancholy and forbidding Dress; that we be not betrayed by the Restraints, under which we lay ourselves, either into vain Self opinion and spiritual Pride, or a Rigidness of Temper, very

^u Col. i. 12.^w 1 Tim. vi. 17.

unsuitable to the gentle Spirit of the Christian Profession: but particularly, that we forbear to condemn, or even despise, our Brethren of more seeming Latitude; who, it may be under the Appearance of a freer Life, (which was our Saviour's own Case, for he *came eating and drinking* *) preserve really and inwardly a stricter Guard over their Thoughts, Words, and Actions, than we do. And in general, all Persons ought to take Heed, that while they are watching against the Approach of one Sort of Sins, those of another do not find a ready Admission. We are willing enough to keep at ever so great a Distance from the Faults, to which we have little or no Inclination; and often affect to make our Zeal in that respect remarkable: but then perhaps more favourite Vices have easy Entrance into our Breasts, and take firm Possession of them. We are shocked, for Instance, and with much Cause, at the monstrous and ruinous Eagerness for Pleasure, the profligate and unprecedented Contempt of Religion, that prevails in the World: our Behaviour, on these Heads, is unblameable, exemplary; and we value ourselves upon it beyond Bounds. Yet possibly, all the while, we indulge ourselves to

* Matth. xi. 19. Luke vii. 34.

the full another Way: are unjust and fraudulent, or selfish and unreasonable, or penurious and hard-hearted, or censorious and unforgiving, or peevish and ill-tempered; make every one about us uneasy, and those chiefly, whose Happiness ought to be our first Care. This is applauding ourselves for being fortified, where the Enemy is not likely to make an Attack: and leaving the Places, that are most exposed, quite undefended. Every one therefore ought to study the weak Parts of his own Heart and Conduct, and spend the main of his Attention upon these: that so not only a wrong Inclination or two may be rooted up, (which if left to themselves would scarce grow) or may be sacrificed in favour of others as bad; but the whole *Body of Sin* be destroyed; the *Flesh*, the Principle of Evil, *with all its Affections and Lusts*, nailed to the Cross of Christ.

And this Duty of Mortification is no more confined to one Season, than to one Sin. The Practice of it either must be constant, or will be fruitless. The Time of Lent indeed hath been more especially appropriated to it: not that we should think the Shew, or the Reality, of a little more Exactness than ordinary, for a few Weeks, (productive perhaps only of ill Humour) so meritorious;

meritorious ; that when we have once got it over, we may live almost as we please, till the unwelcome Days return, when we are to atone afresh for our past Offences, and so make Way for the Commission of future ones. For, as the Son of *Sirach* observes, *He, that washeth himself after the touching of a dead Body, if he touch it again, what availeth his washing ? So is it with a Man, that fasteth for his Sins, and goeth again and doth the same. Who will hear his Prayer, or what doth his humbling profit him ?* Our great Concern is to mortify all irregular Desires with such incessant Care, that there may be as little Need, as little Room, as possible, to distinguish one Season from another in that Respect. But because we are strangely apt to postpone a Work, generally disagreeable in proportion as it is necessary ; our Church hath wisely directed, that the Negligent, (and we all are such in some Measure) should now be more solemnly called to consider their Ways, afflict their Souls for their Transgressions, and renew the intermitted Discipline which is requisite to make their Hearts better. This is our true Business at present. Methods of keeping Lent, which end with it, and leave behind them no durable Effect, can-

† *Eccles xxxiv. 25, 26.*

not

not be of much Use; and may be fatal, by deceiving us into a false Security, and Forgetfulness of what I proposed to shew you,

III. That our Christian Profession strongly binds us to mortify continually every immoral Appetite and Passion. *They, that are Christ's, have crucified the Flesh, with the Affections and Lusts.*

Instead of this, the Apostle might have said; (like the Philosophers of his own and preceding Times) they who are truly rational Beings, who see the Beauty of Virtue and Deformity of Vice, who feel the Pleasures and the Pains of the moral Sense, who form just Notions of the real Good and Evil of Man, who are ambitious of imitating their Creator and acquiring his Favour in their present State of Existence and perhaps a future one: but in saying, *they who are Christ's*, he hath said all this, and much more. Christianity comprehends every Consideration of Nature and Reason in the fullest Manner; and as they are all insufficient, some too speculative and unaffecting, some too disputable and uncertain; adds others of inestimable Value, peculiar to itself. A Heathen may want almost intirely, and must want in a great Degree, both the Means of learning what
Mankind

Mankind is most deeply interested in, and Motives and Power to practise what he hath learned: a Christian, allowed to read and hear the Word of God, cannot, without inexcusable Negligence: and *of them, to whom much is given, much will be required* ^b. Through Christ, who hath enlightened us, we *know all Things* ^c; *through Christ which strengtheneth us, we can do all Things* ^d: through Christ, who died for us, what we do shall be rewarded, though deserving nothing, with eternal Life. And thus hath *the Grace of God, which bringeth Salvation, not only taught, but enabled us, denying Ungodliness and worldly Lusts, to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present World* ^e. They, who are Christ's in Name only, bind themselves to this: they, who are in Reality his, perform it. *If any Man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his* ^f: and *the Fruits of the Spirit*, we are told immediately before the Text, and through the whole Scripture, are the pious Movements of a good Heart, and the Actions of a good Life. Our blessed Lord *gave himself for us, that he might sanctify and cleanse us, and present us to himself holy and without Blemish* ^g. If then we labour

^b Luke xii. 48.^c 1 John ii. 20.^d Phil. iv. 13.^e Tit. ii. 11, 12.^f Rom. viii. 9.^g Eph. v. 25, 26, 27.

not to become such, we frustrate, so far as our own Concern reaches, his gracious Intentions, and make his Sufferings vain. If we crucify not our Affections and Lusts, *we crucify him afresh, and put him to open shame*^h; pour Contempt on his glorious Undertaking ourselves, and expose it to the Scorn of others: the Consequence of which will be, that, as *while we profess to know him, in Works we deny him*ⁱ, so will he in the Day of Judgment *profess to us, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work Iniquity*^k. Still it should be observed, that so far both good and bad Christians are his, as to be always under his Dominion. *None of us liveth to himself, and no Man dieth to himself*, exempted from his Authority: *whether we live or die, we are the Lord's*^l; but the Wicked continue under his Government, just as upon Earth, Rebels continue Subjects; not intitled to Benefits from their Prince, but liable justly to forer Punishments, than his other Enemies. Think then, will you be *Christ's at his coming*^m, only to have *Vengeance taken of you in flaming Fire*ⁿ, or to *enter with him into his Glory*^o? If the latter be your Choice, the only Way to it is, that you think it not too much to crucify

^h Heb. vi. 6.
xiv. 7, 8.
xxiv. 26.

ⁱ Tit. i. 16.
^m 1 Cor. xv. 23.

^k Matth. vii. 23.
ⁿ 2 Theff. i. 8.

^l Rom.
^o Luke

your Flesh figuratively, renounce and destroy your forbidden Desires, however painful it be, for him; since he thought it not too much to let his Flesh literally be crucified for you. And if you will make sure of doing this at all, you must do it immediately.

Perhaps you will say, we hope it is done already: for the Text assures us, all Believers have done it. But observe: at that Time almost all professed Believers were real ones; for they had no Temptation to make a false Profession: and in general, speculative Believers were practical ones; else they would never have suffered what they did. But in our Times, the Case is much altered. And in all Times, the true Method of arguing is, not, *we are Christ's*, and therefore *we have crucified our Affections and Lusts*: but, *we have crucified our Affections and Lusts*, and therefore *we are Christ's*. Our Faith must be proved from our Works: not our Works from our Faith. By *their Fruits ye shall know them*, is the Rule^p: and by those we must know our own State, as well as that of others. But supposing we have Cause to believe it good, have we not greater Cause to be sensible it is not perfect? And should we not be striving continually to make it more so? *They that are*

^p Matth. vii. 20.

Christ's, the Apostle tells us, *have crucified the Flesh*. But he doth not tell us, they have done it so effectually and so completely, as they ought. On the contrary he tells us, that he himself had *not yet attained*, but was still *pressing on towards the Mark*^a. And surely we should be doing it without ceasing. Unless we are careful to advance, we shall be driven back: unless we pursue our Enemy to Destruction; though put to Flight, he will return: though *wounded* as it were *to Death*, *his deadly Wound will be healed*^r: and gradually, if not suddenly, his Empire may become more absolute, and our Condition more deplorable, than ever. At least he will be perpetually annoying us, disturbing our Peace, taking away our Comfort, darkening our Prospects. Nor shall we be Losers in this Life only, by Neglect of going on to Perfection: but in the next also, the less complete the Victory is, the smaller will be the Reward: and they *who have sown sparingly, shall reap also sparingly*^s. Let us therefore sow plentifully the Seeds of every Virtue; and extirpate with such Diligence every *Root of Bitterness*, that there may be the freest Room and the fullest Nourishment for every Grace of the Christian Life to flourish,

^a Phil. iii. 12, 13, 14.^r Rev. xiii. 3.^s 2 Cor. ix. 6.

and be fruitful. *Of ourselves indeed we can do nothing* ^t. But this is far from being a just Plea for stopping where we are : since *God is able to make all Grace abound towards us ; that we having always all Sufficiency in all Things, may abound to every good Work* ^u. Provided then we apply to him, by the Means he hath appointed, and engaged to bless, humble Faith, earnest Prayer, strict Vigilance, and constant Use of his holy Ordinances, we shall not fail to experience the Truth of his Promise : *They, that wait upon the Lord, shall renew their Strength : they shall mount up with Wings, as Eagles ; they shall run, and not be weary ; they shall walk, and not faint* ^w.

^t John xv. 5.^u 2 Cor. ix. 8.^w Is. xl. 31.

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S E R M O N X V I I .

H E B. xi. 17.

By Faith, Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac : and he, that had received the Promises, offered up his only begotten Son.

TH E Character of *Abraham* in general is represented throughout the Word of God, as highly respectable. But his Obedience to the Divine Command, in devoting to Death, and sacrificing, so far as the Act of the Mind was concerned, his beloved Son, the only Heir of his Family, and of all the gracious Predictions made to him, is peculiarly celebrated for its transcendent Piety ; first in the Old Testament, by an Angel from Heaven, speaking in the Name of God, then in the New, by the Apostle St. *James*, as well as the Writer of this Epistle. But, as they, who look at the Sun too intently, dazzle their Eyes, till all around them, and

even the Light itself, appears dark: so Men have strained their Thoughts, in comparing and measuring the Weakness of their own Faith and Resolution against the Strength of *Abraham's*, till they have been quite confounded with it. And hence some have imagined this Direction to be such a one as could not possibly come from God: whilst others have thought it was a Trial, rather of his Discernment, than of his Dutifulness; and that though he meant well, he might have reasoned better. The former Opinion is designed to contradict and discredit Scripture: nor is the latter, though intended to remove an Objection against it, by any Means consistent with it. For we should never have found there such lofty Encomiums of his proceeding so far, through Mistake, towards an Action, which would have been extremely unnatural and barbarous, if the Injunction to do it, had not altered the Quality of it: but whatever kind Acknowledgement had been made of his good Purpose, there would certainly have been a Reproof of his wrong Judgment; at least an Admonition, that it was wrong: whereas we find nothing but unmixed Commendation of his Behaviour. For the Sake therefore, both of such as incline to either of
these

these Notions, and of many humbler and devouter Minds ; who yet feel, (as perhaps we have now and then most of us done) great Reluctance in their Affections against this Article of sacred History, and some Difficulties in Point of Reason also : I shall endeavour to shew distinctly,

I. The Possibility of God's giving such an Order.

II The Evidence, which *Abraham* had, and we may have now, of his actually giving it.

III. The Improbability, that the Obedience paid to it should have any bad Effect in after Times.

IV. The good Ends, that might be and were promoted by it.

I. The Possibility of God's giving such an Order.

Indeed, were we but nearly so modest as we ought to be, we should be very backward to question, whether a Being of unsearchable Wisdom can do what there is any competent Proof he hath done : and should carry a strong Sense of our own Short-sightedness and Incapacity along with us, to check all Petulance of arguing on such Points. But happily a moderate Submission of our poor Understandings to the Divine, will be sufficient on the Occasion before us.

That

That *the God of the Spirits of all Flesh* ^a, in *whose Hand is the Soul of every living Thing, and the Breath of all Mankind* ^b, may take away at his Pleasure what he hath *given* only during his Pleasure ^c, cannot possibly be doubted. We experience, that in the daily Course of his Providence he takes away the most innocent, the most deserving, the most useful Persons, very unexpectedly, and, to our thinking, very unseasonably; for Causes not to be known till *the Day of the Revelation of his righteous Judgment* ^d. And, shocking as this may often seem, or afflicting as it may feel, it is yet no more than removing his Subjects, (in whom he hath absolute Property, and over whom he hath unlimited Authority) from one Part of his Dominions to another, still to remain under the same gracious Government, and only to serve in a different and better Station.

Now what he so continually doth by various Diseases, and what we call Accidents, (many of them attended with long and dreadful Sufferings) why might he not, if on any Occasion he saw it proper, do by a shorter and easier Method, by the Hands of another human Creature? Ma-

^a Numb. xvi. 22.

^b Job xii. 10.

^c Ibid. i. 21.

^d Rom. ii. 5.

Magistrates appoint their Officers to execute those, whom they have condemned. Kings and Generals appoint their Armies to destroy Multitudes, that are guiltless themselves, though possibly involved in the Guilt of others. Killing would be Murder in both these Cases, if a lawful Command did not alter the Nature of them. But that supersedes and overrules the Obligations to the contrary, which else would arise from the common Relation of Man to Man. Surely then God might always give the same Command, whenever he thought fit to interpose. And the Person, who had his Authority, was well authorized, and bound to act according to his Commission. Else not only *Abraham* would have acted unjustifiably in this Matter, but the *Jews* in making War on the *Canaanites*, *Jehu* in extirpating the House of *Abab*, many other Persons in many other Things, all which, the Scripture saith, were done in Obedience to the Voice of Heaven. And the Consequences of making these Concessions, (for we cannot stop at one) every serious Believer will see with Horror. But in Truth we need make none of them. If God cannot empower a Person to do any Thing, but what would be lawful without his Order, some of the lowest of us have a Right to do more than

than he. And if he can empower in one such Case, why not in all: in that of Life and Death, as well as the rest?

Since then his mere Command given might oblige one Man to take away the Life of another: it might oblige a Father to take away the Life of his Son. For the particular Relation of Kindred, can no more be pleaded as a Ground of disobeying the Divine Will, than the universal Relation of Humanity. We own, God hath enjoined Parents to love their Children: but not better, than they love their Maker. He hath planted in their Hearts Instincts of warm Affection towards them: but not to the Prejudice of their Duty towards himself. The Law of Nature, that of the Land, may require a Man to put his guilty Son to Death; to expose his innocent Son, for the needful Service of the Public, to unavoidable Destruction; nay, himself to fight against his Son, if they are Members of two Societies at War with each other. And why might not God require whatever of the like Sort he judged to be requisite? The Magistrate's only Justification is, that he acts on the Authority of God, as declared by the Voice of Nature: and why is it not a sufficient Justification, that *Abraham* acted upon the same Authority, as declared,

clared by the Voice of Revelation? One End of Sacrifices probably was, to recognize, that all Things are God's Gift, by surrendering some choice Parts of them to him in this Form. Now *Isaac* had been the Gift of God in a most peculiar Sense: his Parents had enjoyed the Comfort of him for many Years. And if he, who might have snatched him away before, whenever he would, by any of the common Methods, was pleased to demand him back at last by as extraordinary a one, as that in which he bestowed him, what could be said against it?

I acknowledge, it may seem Hard-heartedness to argue in so rigid a Manner on so tender a Subject: and am very sensible, that there is no Possibility of considering *Abraham's* Case as our own, nay of imagining it distinctly as his, without bleeding inwardly at the Thought; and rejoicing from ones Soul, that the Days of such Commands are long ago past. But still the Right of issuing them forth was ever inherent in God, and must be confessed, and when it is needful, vindicated. To this very Hour both Religion and Virtue call upon us frequently to controul and act against our most affectionate inward Feelings, even towards them that are dearest to us; though not near to the same Degree,

gree, that *Abraham* did. And it is a very ungrateful Return, instead of thanking God, that he doth not carry our Trial so far, to insist that he cannot.

He cannot indeed require what is absolutely and always unfit : but taking away Life is fit or unfit, according to Circumstances. He cannot require a Parent to hate his Child : and it is the Height of infidel Perverseness, to interpret our Saviour's Words, of *hating Father and Mother and Wife and Children* ^e, literally and strictly, when we have a plain Direction to interpret them comparatively ^f. But he may require a Parent, as we have daily Proof, willingly to yield up and resign his Child : and to offer him, is but one Step further, however painful a one. He cannot give Men a general Commission to take away each others Lives : for this would be inconsistent with the Scheme of his Providence, and destructive to Mankind. But he may give a particular Commission of that Sort in some extraordinary Juncture : for it may be to their Advantage. He cannot order a single Life to be taken away, or a single Action of any Kind to be done, without Reason ; for it would be contrary to the Perfection of his Nature. But he may have many Reasons utterly beyond our

^e Luke xiv. 26.

^f Matth. x. 37.

Reach. And to assert that he can have none, is to set up our own Understandings for infinite, and deny his to be such. Whether we can perceive any Reasons, and what, in the present Case, will be inquired under the fourth Head. It suffices for this first, that God might see Reasons to give forth the Command, which the Scripture saith he did. He saw indeed at the same Time Reasons against the Execution of it: as *Solomon* did against the Execution of his, though a very wise one, for the Division of the Child ². But *Abraham* could by no Means penetrate so far: and therefore was bound to obey, if on due Consideration he was sure he was ordered. Let us now then examine

II. What Evidence he might have of this, and we may have even now.

The Almighty and All-wise cannot be without some Way, probably many Ways, of notifying his Will, whatever it be, clearly to his Creatures: for even we can notify ours clearly, one to another. If an Equal of ours were to bid us do what *Abraham* was bidden: though we ought to refuse Obedience, yet we should not doubt, or we need not long doubt, who it was, or what he said. And why could not *Abraham* be equally certain, when God spoke to him?

² 1 Kings iii. 25.

That

That we know not, how God shewed it to be himself, is no Argument in the least, that he did not shew it effectually. If it were, it would be an Argument against all Revelation, as well as this. Some indeed have objected, that *Abraham* could not have so full Proof by any Revelation, that God enjoined him to sacrifice his Son, as he had by Reason, that it was criminal. But, you have seen, he had no Proof of its being criminal, if God enjoined it: but full Proof of the contrary. And therefore the Objection, rightly stated, is only, that he had not so much Evidence of the Injunction, as he had, that the Action, unless it were enjoined, was unlawful. Now even this is more, than can ever be made out. But, supposing it: A Judge hath seldom or never such absolute Certainty of the Guilt of a Prisoner tried before him, as he hath, that unless he be guilty, he should not condemn him. Yet still, if the Evidence of his Guilt be sufficient, he condemns him very justly. And so, if the Evidence of God's Command was sufficient, *Abraham* very justly might have sacrificed *Isaac*. Let us therefore consider, without Prejudice, whether it was or not: fairly taking the Case, as it lies in Scripture.

There

There we find, that he had enjoyed the Privilege of supernatural Communications from God, for above the Space of fifty Years: during which Time we have many of them recorded, and there might be many more. He had infallible Assurance, that they were true ones; not only from visible Appearances of Angels, and of the Divine Glory, but from the punctual Accomplishment of the Predictions contained in them: particularly, the Destruction of *Sodom*, and the Birth of *Isaac* in his and *Sarah's* old Age; Events, which God alone could foresee, or bring to pass. And it was *after these Things*, as *Moses* takes Care to give Notice expressly ^h, that he was tried with the Command to offer up his Son. Now surely by so long Experience he was thoroughly qualified to distinguish real Revelations from imaginary ones. Nor would God either permit the Man, whom he honoured with the Title of *his Friend* ⁱ, to be misled into a horrible and most afflicting Crime, by a Delusion of Satan, attended with all the external Marks of Truth; or deliver a Command to him of so extraordinary a Nature, and leave him doubtful of its Genuineness; but would certainly remove all possible Difficulty

^h Gen. xxii. 1.ⁱ 2 Chron. xx. 7. Isa. xli. 8. James ii. 23.

about believing it, when those of obeying it were singly so hard to surmount. Indeed an Order, so strangely different from any that he had ever received, and which deprived him of the dearest Blessing he had, must of itself put him on his Guard, to the very utmost, against mistaking : however prepared he might be by the former mysterious Dispensations of Providence, for future ones. That he loved *Isaac* most tenderly, no one can dispute : that he had a general Tendernefs of Heart, his interceding for the vilest of Sinners clearly proves : that his Notions of God's moral Attributes were just and lively, appears from his own Words in his very Intercession ; *That the Righteous should be as the Wicked, that be far from thee : shall not the Judge of all the Earth do right* * ? And that he had any enthusiastic Turn of Mind, or any superstitious Principles, that could induce him to think the offering up his Son prescribed when it was not, or the voluntary Perpetration of so shocking a Deed an Act of Merit, that could procure him a Compensation from Heaven for destroying his whole Comfort and Hopes at once ; there is no Shadow either of Proof or Likelihood. We never find him elsewhere attempt-

* Gen. xviii. 25.

ing to sacrifice human Victims. There had nothing remarkable of any Sort befallen him, that could even seem to require one ; much less so exceedingly precious a one : and the *Heathens* themselves did not offer up their Sons, without being, as they thought, in the most urgent Necessity and extreme Danger. Indeed we are not certain, that there was in his Time such a Practice in the World : or, if there was, that he knew it. Or if he did ; as we find it anciently denied ¹, and no where affirmed, that this execrable Custom prevailed in his native Country, probably his Education must lead him to abhor it : and certainly the whole Spirit of his Religion was totally different from the bloody, as well as the lewd, Idolatries and Superstitions of *Canaan*.

Some indeed have suspected the contrary, because it is not said, that he expressed any Surprise, or even Reluctance, on receiving the Command. But neither is it said, that he expressed any Joy, when a Countermand stopped his Hand. Yet must he not of Necessity, must not any Man in like Circumstances, be his religious Opinions what they will, have felt both ? And therefore why may not such Things well

¹ *Philo de Abrahamo*, p. 27.

be understood, without being related? And especially as to the former, what if the sacred Historian drew a Veil over Agitations, too strong to be described: as the Painter of a Heathen Story is said to have done, and is praised for doing it, on the same Occasion? Might not *Abraham*, notwithstanding this, feel the utmost Agony of paternal Fondness; beg of God to preserve him from Illusion and Error; beg, that, *if it were possible, this Cup might pass from him*^m: yet still, when the Will of God, so far as he was capable of judging, appeared to be otherwise, acquiesce without Expostulation. For *Sodom*, it is true, he did expostulate. But how different were the two Cases? That was a charitable Plea for others: this had been an interested one for himself. If *Sodom* was destroyed, all Hope of Repentance was cut off from a Multitude of Sinners: if *Isaac* suffered, it was not as a Punishment; but as a Trial, sure to end well. And therefore the former Case called for Intercession: the latter, for Obedience only.

Having no Room then to apprehend, that *Abraham* had any Thing in his Mind to mislead him; we can have none to doubt, but he examined such an Order as this with the greatest

^m Matth. xxvi. 39.

Circumspection, and yielded only to irresistible Evidence of its being Divine. Besides, it was not given him to be executed that Moment, without Leisure to recollect himself. Three Days intervened before the Time for the Execution of it: and during all these his Son was continually in his Sight, going along with him to the Place of Sacrifice: nothing interrupted his Attention to the Horrors of this one dreadful Subject. Full Time was allowed for Imagination to cool, for Nature to work, for Objections of every Sort to be raised. Yet *Abraham* persevered: and therefore his Conviction must be founded on Proofs, that could not be shaken.

It might indeed appear strange to him, that God should mention no Motive to an Injunction so severe. But he would perceive immediately, that one Motive was the Trial of his Faith, which was tried more completely by assigning no other: and he would perceive afterwards, that no other could be assigned, because the Intention of Heaven was that the Deed should not be done.

Besides this lesser Difficulty, there were, in Point of Reason, two principal ones. The first

was, the Unlawfulness of the Action : and how that might be removed, I have shewn you. The other, to which the Verse after the Text refers, was, the Prediction, that in *Isaac his Seed should be called* : that the holy Nation, and the promised Messiah, should descend from him. For, it might be alledged, How could that be verified, if he was to be slain now ? And yet, with whatever Laws of human Society God might dispense, he would certainly preserve his own Truth inviolate. But in what Manner *Abraham* answered this, the following Verse informs us. *He accounted*, he reasoned, for so the Word signifies, *that God was able to raise him up even from the Dead : whence also he received him in a Figure*. The Birth of *Isaac* was like receiving him from the Dead, on account of the Age of both his Parents. Yet when it was foretold, *Abraham*, to use the Words of St. Paul, *considered not his own Body, now dead, when he was about an hundred Years old, neither yet the Deadness of Sarah's Womb, but was fully persuaded, that what God had promised, he was able to perform*ⁿ : and the Event justified his Faith. Encouraged by this, he now a second

ⁿ Rom. iv. 19, 21.

Time against Hope believed in Hope, that he might become the Father of many Nations °. For that Power, which had quickened the barren aged Womb, could also quicken the lifeless Dust. It was only carrying on the same Kind of wonderful Interposition, that he had already seen begun. And thus did that very Prediction, which might seem to create the most insuperable Difficulty, afford him a Clew to extricate him out of all Difficulty, in Point of Argument, intirely. For if *Isaac* was to have a Posterity, he must be raised again: and that would vindicate the Command of God, and the Patriarch's Obedience, to all Mankind ^p.

Some have observed a yet farther Circumstance in the History; that God bade him *offer his Son upon one of the Mountains, which he should tell him of* ^q: and hence they conclude, not improbably, that when it is said, *he lift up his Eyes the third Day, and saw the Place afar off* ^r, he might have known it by some remarkable Sign from Heaven, pointing it out to him. And this would be a new and most seasonable Confirmation, that he was doing what he ought.

° Ver. 18. ^p Neither *Philo* nor *Josephus* intimate, that *Abraham* reasoned thus. But the Author of *Nizzachon vetus*, in *Wagenfeil*, p. 22. doth: who therefore probably borrowed this Solution from the New Testament, or some Christian. ^q Gen. xxii. 2. ^r Gen. xxii. 4.

And, supposing him at length to shew it *Isaac* too, it might well produce in him that intire Submission to so strange a Death, which may else look hardly credible. For he was unquestionably of Age, to have attempted either Resistance or Escape, since he was of Age to carry the Wood for the Sacrifice: yet he appears absolutely resigned; and seems to have been bound for no other Reason, than because Victims usually were. But still he might have yielded himself up, not in Consequence of any immediate Notification to him from above: but from mere Dependance on his Father's well known Judgment and Affection. It must have been from one of the two Motives: and supposing it to be only from the latter and the weaker, it doth the highest Honour to the Characters of them both^s.

But a further and very strong Evidence of *Abraham's* acting by divine Command, was that which appeared in the close of this wonderful Transaction. If an evil and lying Spirit, if a gloomy Turn of Mind, if an Emulation of any barbarous heathen Rite, had prompted him to design this Act; they would have prompted him

^s *Ἰσαακ μετὰ πιστοῦντος γινώσκων τὸ μέλλον ἡδυνετο θυσιᾷ. Clem. Rom. 1 Cor. 8. 31.*

also to complete the Execution of it, and never have let him stop short just where he did. Nay, if these bad Motives had influenced him, and in great Mercy God had stopt him; he would surely at the same Time have shewn him his Error, instead of praising and rewarding him. And therefore his Motives were not bad: but a wise and gracious Being was the Author of the Command, as well as the Dispensation.

But to see this yet more fully, let us consider

III. The Improbability of its producing any hurtful Effects in after Days.

Men may indeed run mad, and think *Abraham's* Example authorizes them to kill their nearest Relation, or whom they will. And so they may run mad, and think the public Good, or any thing else, authorizes them. But that any one ever did plead the Precedent of *Abraham* for such an Action, I believe is not pretended. And plainly no one in his Senses can. *Abraham* was a public and extraordinary Person: he was a sovereign Prince, and accountable to no Power upon Earth; he lived when Divine Revelations were frequent, had long been acquainted with the proper Marks of them, and used to see them verified: his Inclinations and his Interest conspired in the strongest Manner to pre-
serve

serve him from Mistake: he knew by God's Promise, that if he sacrificed his Child by God's Order, he would soon rise again: and at last he was not permitted to do, what merely for a Trial, he was commanded: nor hath any human Creature ever been commanded it since. How can this possibly be Encouragement to a private and common Man; subject, he and his whole Family, to the Laws of the Society, of which he is a Member; born 4000 Years after *Abraham*, in a quite different State of Things; when no Revelations are to be looked for, but all Pretences to them suspected in the highest Degree; who hath had no Experience of them, nor can guess of what Nature they should be, if there were any: how can he dream of Encouragement from hence, to commit a Deed, contrary to the standing Rules of his own Reason, of human Authority, and of the Word of God, merely because he hath a strong Inclination to it, perhaps to serve some selfish or wild Purpose, that he hath at Heart?

Still some have alledged, that however plausibly we may argue, in Fact human Sacrifices began early in the World: and what could be so likely to give Rise, or, at least, Countenance to them, as this Command? But, according to
some

some old Accounts, they began before it. And suppose they did not; still, if any Persons had either learned them, or been reconciled to them from hence, it must surely have been *Abraham's* Posterity. And yet we do not find, that ever any one of them, excepting the single doubtful Case of *Jephtha* 700 Years after, so much as once thought of such an Offering to the God of their Fathers. It was Idols only, that they worshipped thus; and they did it in Imitation, not of *Abraham*, but of those very *Canaanites*, whom they had been ordered to destroy for their Wickedness, and expressly forbidden to follow in this Act of it. *Take Heed to thyself, that thou inquire not, saying, how did these Nations serve their Gods? Even so will I do likewise. For every Abomination to the Lord, which he hateth, have they done: their Sons and their Daughters have they burnt in the Fire to their Gods* †. Nor did the *Canaanites* alone, but Nations, that probably had never heard of *Abraham* or of them, offer such Victims. And therefore the Custom seems altogether the Offspring, either of diabolical Delusions, or of priestly Tyranny, combined with gross Ignorance and frantic Terror; suggesting, that the

† Deut. xii. 30, 31.

most precious and most painful Sacrifices must be the most efficacious. But had any ever supported themselves in this Practice, by the History of *Abraham*, it must have been by the grossest Abuse of that History : and every Proceeding, every Mercy of God, is liable to equal Abuse. A Command of such a Nature, never given but once, and to one Man, and then countermanded before Execution, and clearly explained to be meant, neither for the averting of any Danger, nor the Expiation of any Sin, but merely for an extraordinary Trial of that Man's Dutifulness, could not in Reality make the actual Performance of the Thing, so commanded, a common Usage for quite different Purposes : any more than *Solomon's* Order for *dividing the Child in two* ^v could make the Performance of that a common Usage. Indeed the directly contrary Conclusion was the natural one : that God approved not human Victims ; but only such, as he had provided for *Abraham*, instead of his Son. And if the Computation of some Chronologers be right, that, in a few Years after this Time, sacrificing Men was abolished in that Part of *Egypt*, which lay nearest to *Abraham's* Residence ; (where perhaps it was

^v 1 Kings iii. 25.

never taken up again) we shall have Room to think the Transaction, that we are now considering, might have a most happy Consequence, in that very Respect, in which it is groundlessly accused of having a bad one.

But thus I am got insensibly into what I proposed to shew

IV. The good Ends, which might be, and were, promoted by it.

Indeed, could we discover none, we are just as ignorant of the Design of several Things in God's Creation: which appear, though certainly without Reason, both useless and hurtful. But in the present Case many valuable Purposes are visible and obvious.

This Command was, in the first Place, a noble Manifestation of *Abraham's* Faith and Obedience. The hardest of those Orders which he had received before, was very supportable: and they were accompanied with great Promises of Advantage; in particular of worldly Advantage. This, on the other Hand, was severe beyond Expression; and had no Promise or Consolation at all annexed to it: but, instead of that, it enumerated to him the most cutting Circumstances, and placed them before him in the fullest Light. *Take now thy Son, thine only Son, Isaac,*
whom

whom thou lovest, and offer him up ^w. Yet, pierced to the Heart, as he must be, by these Expressions, he dutifully submitted; without seeking Excuses from any dissuasive Reasonings, without throwing on any one the least Share of the Burthen of his own Anguish; without exposing himself to the tender Solicitations of *Sarah*; without acquainting *Isaac* what was intended, before it became absolutely needful. How astonishingly great, how composed, how considerate a Self-denial was this!

Yet further, the piteous Deed was not to be done immediately, whilst the Impression of the Divine Voice was sounding fresh in his Ears, and excluded every other Sentiment; but at the Distance of three whole Days: during which every Feeling of paternal Affection would return in full Force; and even the inferior Consideration, of what his Family and the World would think and say to so unnatural an Action, if *Isaac* did not rise again instantly, as there was no Proof he would, must singly have a Weight very hard to be supported. Nor were these Days to be spent in Retirement, in Meditation and Prayer, to fortify his Resolution; but altogether in the Company of the dear Object, whom he

^w Gen. xxii. 2.

was to slay ; whose Conversation would be in a thousand Instances the more moving, as he went along with him unsuspecting of what was to follow ; and whose innocent Question at last, *My Father, behold the Fire and the Wood, but where is the Lamb for a burnt Offering* ^x, must, one should think, have completed the melting down of all human Resolution. But *Wisdom preserved him*, as the Book of *Wisdom* expresses it ^y, *blameless unto God, and kept him strong against his tender Compassion towards his Son* : till now, when the Sacrifice of the Mind was made to the utmost, and only the outward Act was wanting, the *Hand* being *stretched forth* ^z even for that ; the Goodness of the Almighty broke forth on a sudden, like the Sun from behind a black Cloud concealing it, and the *Angel of the Lord* called unto him out of Heaven, and said, *lay not thine Hand upon the Lad : for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy Son, thine only Son, from me* ^a. The Transport of hearing these Words must have made in a Moment large Amends for the preceding Pangs. *Isaac* was restored to him without going through *the Bitterness of Death* ^b : Reproach and Misconstruction was avoided : the

^x Gen. xxii. 7. ^y Wisd. x. 5. ^z Gen. xxii. 10. ^a Ver. 11, 12. ^b 1 Sam. xv. 32.

dreadful

dreadful Deed dispensed with: the willing Mind accepted: and a solemn Approbation pronounced over him from above, anticipating the final Sentence, *Well done, good and faithful Servant* ^c.

Indeed, before this, God had declared, *I know Abraham* ^d. But now he knew him by a new Proof: and, which is the constant Scripture Sense of his trying any one, he manifested him by the Trial, to Angels, to Men, to himself: *and Experience wrought in him sure Hope not to be ashamed upon any future Occasion, because the Love of God was thus shed abroad in his Heart* ^e. A further Discovery was, and a very delightful one it must be, that, by so decisive an Experiment of *Isaac's* Piety, his Father knew him to be worthy of his utmost Affection; and worthy of the Choice, which God had made of him, to support Religion, and be the Progenitor of the promised Seed.

Nor did this Trial convey only Improvement, and Comfort, and Reward here and hereafter, to *Abraham*: but useful Instruction to others also. Hence it appeared, that the Servants of the true Deity were as ready to perform his hardest Commands, as those of false ones could be to obey theirs: but that he did not require

^c Matth. xxv. 21.

^d Gen. xviii. 19.

^e Rom. v. 3, 4, 5.

of them to give *their First-born for their Transgression, the Fruit of their Body for the Sin of their Soul; but to do justly, and to love Mercy, and walk humbly with their God*^f. Hence also it appeared, that God was not partial in his Choice of the *Jews* to be his peculiar People: but properly fixed on that Nation, where the most illustrious Instances of religious Obedience had been given; for which this Prerogative, granted them, was a fit Recompence; besides that the Influence of such Examples and Teachers of it, afforded a greater Probability of its lasting there, than any where else.

Hence likewise we may all of us learn, what is yet more material, not to fear making Use of our Reason in Religion, for *Abraham* used his on the Point before us; but still to make a sober and modest Use of it: to believe and do what we plainly see is taught and commanded, though neither the Particulars of the Doctrine, nor the Grounds of the Precept, be at all clear; and not to reject hastily and rashly what we read in Scripture concerning occasional Directions given formerly from above, though it be difficult to account for some of them at present. We may learn further, that the *Victory, which overcometh*

^f Mic. vi. 7, 8.

the World is our Faith^s; but that we are to shew our Faith by our Works^h, as St. James observes *Abraham* shewed hisⁱ: not thinking our own Pressures heavier, and our own Virtue in bearing them greater, than any ones else ever were; but joining Humility with Resignation. And lastly, we may learn to obey God cheerfully in the most unwelcome Injunctions, and trust him boldly in the most inextricable Perplexities: which last we find was an ancient Lesson, founded on this Narration. For, from *Abraham's* saying to *Isaac*, *God will provide*, (in the *Hebrew* it is *see for*) a *Lamb*^k, the Place received its Name, *Jehovah jirah*, and a Proverb its Rise, *in the Mount of the Lord it shall be seen*^l: that is, in the very Extremity, if not before, Provision will be made. And indeed, as this Part of the Patriarch's History is recorded in the earliest Book of the Bible; it is impossible to say, of how frequent Use, or how great upon the whole, it may have been, from his own Time downwards, to good Persons in all Ages of the Church, *Jewish* and *Christian*, under public Afflictions and private. But evidently it may be of unspeakable Benefit to us, if we set

^s 1 John. v. 4.
^k Gen. xxii. 8.

^h James ii. 18.
^l Ver. 14.

ⁱ Ver. 21.

but our Hearts to *walk in the Steps of his Faith^m*, in hope of being *blessed with faithful Abrahamⁿ*, who is *the Father of all them, that believe^o*.

Many however may still object, with too much Truth, that his Pattern, though they allow it to be an excellent one, is one that they could never follow, were they ever so plainly commanded. But then, be thankful at least, that you are not commanded: and be assured you never will. Admire and honour, but never think of blaming, him that was able to do so much; and by that Method, amongst others, excite yourselves to do what you are called to. Since, through Divine Grace, he bore so amazing a Trial, the same Grace can surely strength you to bear common ones: and you may well submit contentedly, if your dearest Blessing is taken from you, since he was willing to sacrifice his with his own Hand; comforting himself, as you may too, by the full Assurance of a future Resurrection. *For if we believe, that Jesus died and rose again: them also, which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with him^p*.

And this leads me to one View more of the Sacrifice of *Isaac*: the Resemblance it hath to

^m Rom. iv. 12.

ⁿ Gal. iii. 6.

^o Rom iv. 11.

^p 1 Theff. iv. 14.

that of Christ. No wonder it was so extraordinary a Transaction in itself, if it was intended to prefigure the most extraordinary and mysterious one, that the World ever saw: as the agreeing Circumstances prove it must. In both Cases you see a good and kind Father causing his beloved, only, and innocent Son to suffer Death. *Isaac* was Heir to the Promises of the temporal *Canaan*: through Christ we claim the Inheritance of the heavenly. *Isaac* carried the Wood, on which he was bound, in order to be offered up⁹; Christ carried the Cross^r, on which he was afterwards nailed, and put to Death. The Place where God appointed the former should die, and where the latter died actually, was the very same; *the Land of Moriah*^s, that is, of God manifested; on one of the

⁹ Gen. xxii. 6.^r John xix. 17.^s Gen. xxii. 2.

² *Chr.* iii. 1. saith, the Temple was built on Mount *Moriah*, where the Lord appeared to *David*. *Joseph. Ant.* l. 1. c. 13. §. 1, 2. saith, that *Μωρον ορος* where the Temple was afterwards built was the Place where *Abraham* was directed to offer *Isaac*. The Book of *Coxri*, p. 85. saith the same thing. *Jerom. Qu. Heb.* in *Gen.* xxii. 2. saith of the *Hebrews* in general, that they affirm it. Yet *Tillotson*, in the End of his Sermon on this Text, mentions him, as saying from an ancient and constant Tradition of the *Jews*, that *Moriah* was *Calvary*. But he specifies not the Place. *Reland Pal.* p. 853. saith, “*Mons Moria* 2 *Chr.* iii. 1. distinguimino debet à Regione *Moria*, in qua Deus Montem aliquem(erant enim plures in illa Regione) se Monstraturum Abrahamo dicit, ubi filium suum offerat.” But I think he doth not mention the Land of *Moriah* elsewhere. Nor doth he explain here, whether he meant any more, than that the Mountain was to be distinguished from the Land, as a

the Mountains of which, the Temple stood ; on another, our Saviour's Cross. The Term of three Days too is remarkably specified in each History^r. *The Lamb*, which *Abraham* said, *God would provide*^u, naturally turns our Thoughts to him, whom the Baptist calls the *Lamb of God*^w; and the Ram substituted for *Isaac*^x, to the Temple-Sacrifices of Animals, Types of the Atonement of Christ. Then lastly, the Mountain, where Provision was made for *Abraham's* Distress, deserved its Name infinitely better, on account of God's providing there for the Redemption of Mankind.

These Things the Patriarch indeed could not understand, unless they were revealed to him : for the Likeness of two Objects cannot be discerned, till both appear. Perhaps he was told the Intent, and thus *saw the Day of Christ and was glad*^y. How gracious an Ending of so terrifying a Dispensation ! But however that

Part from the whole. He saith, p. 854. that *Moriah* was a Part of *Sion*, and p. 860. that *Euseb.* and *Jerom* in *Onomastico* place *Golgotha* to the North of *Sion*. And they do : but say nothing there of *Moriah*. *Vitr. Obs. Sacr.* l. 2. c. 10. §. 8. p. 397, 398. thinks the whole Tract of Country, in which *Zion*, *Calvary*, &c. were, was called the Land of *Moriah*.

^t The following Words are quoted from the ancient *Jewish* Book, *Bereschith Rabba* : there are many Spaces of three Days in Scripture, one of which is the Resurrection of the *Messiah*. It is not in the present Copies : but probably was in the ancient. See *Schoettg. de Messia*, l. 6. c. 5. §. 5. ^u Gen. xxii. 8. ^w John i. 29, 34. ^x Gen. xxii. 13. ^y John viii. 56.

were, we now may justly conclude, that what he then required *Abraham* to do for him, he had purposed from Eternity, in the Counsel of unsearchable Wisdom, to do for his lost Creatures. And, let the comforting Reflection dwell with you, *He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all Things* * ?

* Rom. viii. 32.

S E R M O N XVIII.

DEUT. XXIX. 29.

*The secret Things belong unto the Lord our God :
but those Things, which are revealed, belong
unto us and to our Children for ever ; that we
may do all the Words of this Law.*

IT is one material Consideration, amongst many, in Favour of the *Jewish* and *Christian* Scriptures, that they preserve throughout so due a Medium in the Discoveries, which they make, of Divine Truths, as to direct the Faith and Practice of Men without indulging their Curiosity. The Writings of Enthusiasts would of Course have been overrun with Mysteries : and much fuller of Explanations, that would make them still more obscure, than of the plain Doctrines of Piety and Morals. Impostors would never have neglected to recommend themselves

by doing us so singular a Pleasure, as that of letting us into all the Arcana of Heaven. Both would have entertained us, as they very safely might, with long and astonishing Accounts of the Essence of God, the Orders and Employments of invisible Beings, of the Counsels of Providence in the Government both of them and us, of the Particulars in which the future Happiness and Misery of Man will consist. Now on the contrary, of these Matters holy Writ gives no other than brief, imperfect, general Notices : and those merely in Subservience to the far less agreeable Subjects, of our Duties to God, each other, and ourselves.

Thus it delivers Predictions of future Events : not for the vain Amusement of the Inquisitive ; but partly for Direction, Warning, or Encouragement to particular Nations and Ages : partly to establish the Truth of Revelation, in all Nations and Ages, by their Accomplishment. It contains also supernatural Doctrines : but such only, as make the Ground-work, more or less, of our Obligations, or our Hopes. These it was evidently requisite for us to know : and accordingly they are notified to us : but without any Art used to render the strangest of them plausible, or any Care taken to gratify us with
full

full Information about them, or to shew us why it is withheld. The Articles of Belief are laid down with the utmost Simplicity: our Assent to them is required on the Testimony of God: and when once we have been told enough to regulate our Practice, we are only told farther, that *Faith without Works is dead*^a. A grievous Disappointment to our Wishes undoubtedly: but still our Reason must allow, that this is the proper Conduct of the Lord of all to his Creatures: and we find it to be his perpetual Conduct from the Beginning of the Bible to the End. What our corresponding Duty is, we are taught in several Places; but no where so distinctly and fully, as in the Text: which conveys as necessary Instruction, to this Day, as it did originally, though relating in Part to different Points. And happy would Men always have been made, and happy might they become yet, by the Observance of its Rules. These are

I. That we should never pry into Matters, which infinite Wisdom hath concealed. For *the secret Things belong unto the Lord our God.*

II. That we should receive with attentive Humility whatever it communicates. For *those*

^a James ii. 20.

Things,

Things, which are revealed, belong to us and to our Children for ever.

III. That we should allow every divine Truth its due Influence on our Behaviour. For we are to learn them, *that we may do all the Words of this Law.*

These are the Maxims, which ought to be established in our Minds, before we examine into any particular Doctrine: and the previous Thought, how particular Doctrines will be affected by them, ought to be avoided, as far as is possible. They should be explained without Partiality, embraced without Jealousy, and their genuine Consequences admitted, whatever they may prove to be.

I. That we should never pry into Matters, which infinite Wisdom hath concealed. For we shall seldom, if at all, be wiser for such Inquiries: we shall never be happier or better: and we shall usually be more wretched, and less innocent.

In what Reason or Experience discovers to us, farther Speculations or Trials may produce new Discoveries. But of Articles depending on mere Revelation, as we could have discerned nothing without it, we shall be able to discern very little, if any Thing, beyond it. In the

shortest and seemingly most obvious Consequences, drawn concerning Subjects, that lie naturally out of our Reach, we must be exceedingly liable to Mistakes : and venturing far into the Dark, is the sure Way to stumble. Another State may probably withdraw the Veil, and acquaint us clearly and familiarly with what now perplexes our Reasonings, and wearies our Conjectures. Let us wait then contentedly for the Time, which of Necessity we must wait for : and apply to ourselves the Comfort, which our Saviour gave St. *Peter* on a different Occasion, *What I do thou knowest not now : but thou shalt know hereafter* ^b. Yet even then, Truths will remain, the full Comprehension of which must for ever be impossible, not only to us, but to the highest Creatures of that almighty Being, one of whose Distinctions, inculcated in Scripture, is, *God only wise* ^c. His Nature and Attributes being unlimited, his Works and Providence reaching through Immensity and Eternity, the greatest Advances of finite Beings, must be infinitely distant from a complete understanding of them. *Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto Perfection? It is high as Heaven : what canst thou do? deeper than*

^b John xiii. 7.^c Rom. xvi. 27. 1 Tim. i. 17. Jude 25.*Hell :*

Hell: what canst thou know? The Measure thereof is longer than the Earth, and broader than the Sea^d.

But could Inquiry add more to our Knowledge, than it can: would it increase our Happiness? We meet with Difficulties, and should be glad of Solutions: we enter a little Way into a Subject; see that vastly more lies behind, and earnestly long to be Masters of it. But if we were so, are we at all sure, whether fresh Doubts and Questions, more embarrassing perhaps than the present, might not immediately arise from thence? We find it so in the visible World, where we had less Ground to expect it. New Facts are daily observed, new Properties of Bodies discovered, new Deductions made from them: and what is the Consequence? Why, that the Scheme of Things appears deeper and less fathomable, for every Step we take in Hopes of getting to the Bottom of it. In all Likelihood therefore the same is the Case of the spiritual World too: and, by knowing more of it, we should be farther from being satisfied than ever, if our Satisfaction depends on knowing all. The System of Religion is fully taught us by common Reason, and the plain Parts of Scripture. The

^d Job xi. 7, 8, 9.

Defence of it is conducted most prudently by owning our Ignorance where we are ignorant, which gives no Advantages; whereas Affectation of the contrary gives many. The Practice of it consists, not in filling our Heads with unnecessary Speculations, but applying our Hearts to necessary Duties. The Rewards of it are annexed to believing and doing what is required of us: and how can we be the better then for aiming at more?

Indeed we shall scarcely avoid being much the worse. By engaging in Matters, of which we are unqualified to judge, we shall be in Danger of judging materially wrong; either mistaking the Nature, or even denying the Truth of Religion, like those of old, who, *professing themselves to be wise, became Fools* *. And the Errors, into which we may thus fall, will be the less excusable, as they will proceed from our own Rashness. Besides, the more intent Persons are on pursuing their Theories, the less Time, and usually the less Concern, they will have for performing their Obligations: excepting, it may be, some fanciful ones, which they have built on their imagined Discoveries: resembling those *Worshippers of Angels*, whom

* Rom. i. 22.

St. Paul charges with *intruding into Things, which they had not seen, being vainly puffed up by their fleshly Minds* ¹. Superfluous Inquisitiveness is indeed sometimes accompanied with excessive Diffidence: and then, though less criminal, it produces most tormenting Anxieties. But commonly it proceeds from a Degree of that irreverent Vanity, which possessed our Parent *Eve*, and cost Mankind so dear, of invading such Knowledge, as God hath reserved to himself, instead of acquiescing cheerfully in so much as he hath imparted.

Then with this undutiful Spirit easily associates itself a still more mischievous one, of Uncharitableness and spiritual Tyranny. For when once Men are assuming enough to determine, out of their own Inventions, Things, which their Maker hath not determined, the next natural Step is, to *contend* for them far more *earnestly*, than for *the Faith once delivered to the Saints* ²: casting off Christian Love, refusing Communion or Toleration, and too often renouncing common Humanity, to all who differ from them. And therefore the Apostle gives *Timothy*, at the same Time, these two Directions: *Follow Righteousness, Charity, Peace, with them that*

¹ Col. ii. 18.

² Jude 3.

call on the Lord out of a pure Heart. But foolish and unlearned Questions (and nothing is more unlearned, than disputing in the Dark) avoid; knowing that they do gender Strifes^h.

On all Accounts then we should keep close to plain Reason and plain Scripture: let our Assent be determinate, as far as they are undeniably so; but make no Decision concerning what is doubtful, invent no groundless Hypothesis to clear up what is obscure, nor carry on too long Chains of Argument from what seems the most evident. I conclude this Head with that excellent Advice of the Son of Sirach. *Seek not out the Things that are too hard for thee, neither search the Things that are above thy Strength. But what is commanded thee, think thereupon with Reverence: for it is not needful for thee to see with thine Eyes the Things that are in secretⁱ. Be not curious in unnecessary Matters: for more Things are shewed unto thee, than Men understand. Many are deceived by their own vain Opinion: and an evil Suspicion hath overthrown their Judgment. Without Eyes thou shalt want Light: profess not therefore the Knowledge that thou hast not^k.*

II. The next Rule, which Moses gives, is, that we should receive, with attentive Humili-

^h 2 Tim. ii. 22, 23. ⁱ The Greek hath it, more briefly and expressively, thus: *For of the hidden Things thou hast no need.*
^k Ecclus iii. 21—25.

ty, whatever infinite Wisdom communicates to us. *For those Things, which are revealed, belong to us and to our Children for ever.*

Indeed let any Proposition be delivered to us, as coming from God or from Man, we can believe it no farther than we understand it: and therefore if we do not understand it at all, we cannot believe it at all; I mean, explicitly: but only be persuaded, that it contains some Truth or other, though we know not what. Again, were any Doctrine laid down, which we clearly saw to be self-contradictory, or otherwise absurd, that could never be an Object of our Faith. For there is no Possibility of admitting, upon any Authority, a Thing for true, which we evidently perceive to be false. Nor would calling such Doctrines mysterious mend the Matter in the least. For indeed there is no Mystery in them: they are as plain, as any in Nature; as plainly contrary to Truth, as any Thing else is agreeable to it.

But if our Assent be required to a Proposition, which hath some Meaning and no Inconsistency in it, and is undeniably asserted in a Revelation well proved: but only we have no other Evidence for it; nor should of ourselves ever have imagined any such Thing, indeed should have
thought

thought it very unlikely; and still cannot thoroughly comprehend it; or discover, or so much as guess at, the Reasons, the Manner, the Circumstances, of what we are taught: all this is absolutely no Foundation for disbelieving it. Nay, though we should see Difficulties and Objections against it, which we could not particularly answer, we should allow them only their proper Weight: which may be far overbalanced by the general Attestations given of its Divine Authority.

For that God is able to communicate many important Truths to us, which we have no Means of knowing otherwise, concerning his own Nature, his Designs and Dispensations, concerning the Inhabitants of the invisible World, and our future State in it, can no more be doubted, than whether we ourselves, according to our various Knowledge of Men and Things, are able to give unexpected and serviceable Notices, one to another. And that we should understand nothing farther of his Secrets than is unfolded to us, nor be capable of answering many Questions, that may be asked about them, otherwise than by confessing our Ignorance, is so far from being a Plea against their being really his, that it is a necessary Consequence of it: so far

from being strange in supernatural Things, that it is common in natural ones. In several Articles of revealed Religion, we believe Things of which we know not the Manner or the Reasons. But is it there alone, that we do so? In the whole of God's Creation, what do we meet with, that is not, more or less, of the same Sort? We know not the Essence of our own Mind, nor the precise Distinctions of its several Faculties: and why then should we hope to comprehend, or deny because we cannot comprehend, the personal Characters, which, we are told, exist in the Substance of the Godhead? We know not, how *the Soul and Flesh is one Man*: what wonder if we know not, how *God and Man is one Christ*¹? We are ignorant how the Vicissitudes of Day and Night, Summer and Winter, are produced: how the Fruits of the Earth nourish us: how Bodies cohere, or impel each other: how our several Sensations are performed: how we move a Hand or an Eye, though it is our own doing. Familiar as these Things are; the Manner of them, when examined to the Bottom, hath Obscurities, which the most learned will never penetrate. *I beheld, saith the Preacher, all the Work of God,—that is done*

¹ *Atb.* Creed.

under the Sun. Though a Man labour to seek it out, yet shall he not find it : yea farther, though a wise Man think to know it, yet shall he not be able ^m. Surely then we may content ourselves to act in Matters of Faith, as in those of Sense : and believe what we do understand, the Thing itself in general ; though many Circumstances remain, which we understand not, and therefore are not required to believe any Thing in relation to them ⁿ.

Again : in the Frame of Nature and the Scheme of Providence we discern indeed evident Proofs of Wisdom and Goodness : but with innumerable Particulars intermixed, which we perceive not to be at all useful, or the Creation any Way the better for them. Yet we never think of excepting these from amongst the Works of God : never doubt of their having a real, though unknown, Subserviency to valuable Ends. Why, just so in the Gospel-Revelation : look upon the general Plan, and it is undeniably adapted to promote the Divine Honour, and human Virtue and Happiness : but how some Points are conducive to them, we see less clearly, or

^m Eccl. viii. 17. ⁿ Ubi igitur aut qualis est ista Mens [divina!] Ubi tua, aut qualis? potestne dicere? An si omnia ad intelligendum non habeo, quæ habere vellem; ne iis quidem, quæ habeo, mihi per te uti licebit? *Ac. Tuf. Disp. l. 28.*

perhaps not at all. Yet still, as they are Parts of a System confessedly good, and clearly proved; and we cannot expect to comprehend all the secret Connexions and References in God's moral Government of us, which extends to Eternity, and may extend to Worlds far out of our Sight; it is unreasonable beyond Expression, to refuse believing any Thing, till we know the Ground of every Thing: and to deny that implicit Faith to our Maker in some few Instances, which we are obliged in so many to have in one another. Scornful Rejection of Doctrines, that have all the outward Marks of his Authority, merely because we cannot investigate the inward Reasons or complete Scheme of them, would be shocking Irreverence in the highest of his Creatures: and much worse doth it become our low Rank of Being, and, the lamentable Weakness of our degenerate Faculties. *Hardly do we guess aright at Things, that are upon Earth; and with Labour do we find the Things, that are before us: but the Things that are in Heaven, who hath searched out? And thy Counsel who hath known, except thou give Wisdom, and send thy Holy Spirit from above °?*

° Wisd. ix. 16.

Further

Further yet: should a Revelation contain Assertions, that appear in themselves unlikely; and liable to Objections, that we are at a Loss how to solve: even this, though perhaps it might justly in certain Cases, weaken our Assent, yet would by no Means be sufficient to prevent or destroy it. Some Difficulties may perplex us, merely for want of the Knowledge, that other Men have. Some Subjects, as far as we can judge, have Difficulties on every possible Supposition: which therefore, lying equally against all, cannot be urged against any one in particular: for something must be true. Many Points, which our own Reason proves to us, for Example, concerning the Attributes of God, natural and moral, are embarrassed with Perplexities belonging to them, as hard to be unravelled, as any Thing that Scripture teaches, on these or any other Heads. Indeed whenever a finite Mind hath an infinite Object before it; or one, which, though limited, is too large for its Grasp, the most accurate Arguments upon it, will thwart one another. Throughout the material World are Facts, of which, on proper Testimony, we are very justly persuaded, though we cannot answer half the Objections, that a subtle Reasoner may bring against them. Con-

cerning the free Actions of our own Minds, Doubts have been raised, which, I believe, no Man pretends he can remove. In the wisest Conduct of any worldly Affair, Steps may be taken, for which they can never account, who are acquainted with it only in Part. And surely much less ought we to think of having the Nature and the Ways of God brought down to our poor Apprehensions. Not that every seeming Difficulty in Religion, or in Revelation, is a real one. Some Persons have made Things darker, than they are: others have wanted to make them clearer, than they can be: and between them, unmeaning Words, and unwarrantable Notions, have been added to those of Scripture: which hath thus been charged with what it never meant to say. But we own, after these Mistakes are rectified, there will be Room for plausible Suggestions against some of its Doctrines. And they should neither be disguised on one Hand, nor exaggerated on the other: such Weight as they have, when those Abatements from it have been made, which the Considerations now mentioned to you require, should be fairly allowed them. But then the various Evidences of the Gospel should be allowed their Weight also: and whoever doth that

that

that honestly, will never reject it, or any Article of it.

Some indeed, who are far from rejecting it on the whole, fancy however, that they do it Service by interpreting the mysterious Parts of it in such a Manner, as will reduce them to the Level of our Conceptions: and so are free in wresting Holy Writ from its obvious Meaning, to fix upon it what they deem a more rational one. Now certainly a single Expression, or even a Number of scattered Expressions, must not always be taken in the most rigid Sense. The Nature of the Thing, the Genius of the Language, the Custom of the Writer, his Context, the general Scope of his Doctrine, and of theirs with whom his may be fitly compared, in short, all just Rules of judging ought to be called in, to settle the Import of any difficult Passage: and nothing more built on a few Words, than can be well supported; especially no Article, that is at once of great Consequence and improbable. But still there is an opposite Extreme, too frequent, and very dangerous, of explaining Things away. The sacred Authors are not to have a forced Construction put upon them, to make them suit our Notions the better: but we must examine impartially what they

really deliver ; and take it as it is, with the Difficulties belonging to it. For though the Attempt of altering the Scheme of Revelation, in order to defend it, may be a well-meant Officiousness, it is an irreverent, an unjustifiable, and will be an unsuccessful one. Giving up as indefensible, what is truly scriptural, is so far casting off Scripture : and Unbelievers will refute our Interpretations, and take Advantage of our Concessions : whereas, keeping close to the Plan of God's Word, we need not fear maintaining our Ground. The disputed Articles were doubtless made Parts of it for wise Motives : for many, in all Likelihood, which we see not ; and for some, which we do see. Our Life on Earth is a State of Trial. Many Things try, how we conduct our Affections ; why may not some be placed in our Way for the moral Exercise of our Understandings ? Thus we shall have an Opportunity of shewing, whether, on the one Hand, we will idly neglect employing our Reason at all, or, on the other, presumptuously exalt it against our Maker ; or whether, avoiding both Errors, we will carefully use our own Faculties, and duly respect his Omniscience. By adhering to this Medium, the first Christians preserved the Doctrine of the Gospel in such Purity, that

Irenæus

Irenæus writes concerning them thus. *Neither will the most able Man, who presides in the Church, say other than this; (for no one is above his Master): nor the weakest diminish any Thing from what hath been delivered. For the Faith being one and the same; neither he, that can say much about it, adds to it; nor he, that can say little, takes away* ^p.

III. The last Rule, implied in the Text, is, that we should allow every divine Truth its due Influence on our Behaviour. For we are to learn them, *that we may do all the Words of this Law.*

Indeed merely *receiving the Truth in the Love of it* ^q is a moral Act: and in some Cases may be one of great Virtue. Whence our Saviour saith to St. *Thomas*; *Blessed are they, that have not seen, and yet have believed* ^r: blessed in Proportion to the Integrity of their Judgement, not the Positiveness of their Persuasion. But scarce will it be found, that any Article of Faith is proposed for the Probation of this only. Each hath its practical Consequences, either flowing of Necessity from it, or built with Propriety upon it. In Proportion as we *know God*, we are to *glorify him as God* ^s: according to every

^p *Iren.* l. i. c. 3. al. 10. ^q *2 Thess.* ii. 10. ^r *John* xx. 29.
^s *Rom.* i. 21.

Particular, which the Scripture hath manifested concerning him. And the several Obligations, incumbent on us, towards him, ought not to be estimated, however commonly they are, by their Influence on the Affairs of our present Life, but by the Stress, which he, who alone knows the proper one, hath laid upon them. Our Performance of these Obligations, as it was the true Motive to the Delivery of each Article, is the just Measure of our Belief in it. If we know enough of the mysterious Doctrines in Religion, to fulfil those Duties, of which they are each respectively the Foundation, our Knowledge, however imperfect, is sufficient. And if those Duties remain unfulfilled, the completest Knowledge will not avail us. Nor indeed will the completest Practice of such Duties alone: for we must *do all the Words of God's Law* ¹: and the plainer any Part of it is, the less excusable the Neglect of it will be. Our first and most evident, and therefore strongest Obligations are to the Dictates of our inward Nature. Other Things are necessary for such as have the Means of being acquainted with them. But these lie within the Reach of all Men; and all should observe them preferably to whatever can be Matter of

¹ Deut. xxvii. 26.

Dispute. Living agreeably to clear Rules is the Method for obtaining Light into those, which are obscure. For *if any Man will do his Will, he shall know of the Doctrine, whether it be of God* ^u: whereas it is no Wonder, that they, who *put away a good Conscience, concerning Faith make Shipwreck* ^w. Or however orthodox any Man's Belief may be, if his Life be bad, as he fails in one essential Part of answering the Design of the Gospel, he must fail of the Rewards, and incur the Punishments of it.

But, though every Instance of Christian Behaviour will be indispensably required of those, who make Profession of Christianity: yet one deserves particular mention, since the Apostle hath mentioned it particularly in relation to the present Subject. *Though I understand all Mysteries and all Knowledge, and have all Faith,—and have no Charity, I am nothing* ^x. Now this Virtue is a very comprehensive one: but so far as it belongs peculiarly to the Matter before us, it consists in disposing us to gentle Treatment of those who differ from us in Points of Speculation, and of consequent Practice; especially when such Points are either doubtful in themselves, or perplexed by the Arts of Controversy,

^u John vii. 17.^w 1 Tim. i. 19.^x 1 Cor. xiii. 2.

or when Men are unfitted by involuntary Prejudices to judge rightly concerning them. We must indeed think as we apprehend Reason and Scripture to direct us, both of the Importance of Things, and the Conduct of Men. On proper Occasions too our Opinion must be declared. We are by no Means to acknowledge, either in our Words or Actions, those for sound Believers, whom we conceive not to be such: nor to shew Indifference about Doctrines, which appear to us of Moment to the Salvation of Mankind. Errors may proceed from as blameable a Temper, and produce as mischievous Effects, as the grossest Immoralities. * And we may deem and pronounce a Man's Condition to be dangerous on Account of his Errors: yet have the truest Good-will and Compassion for him; nay, and the highest Regard in other Respects.

But if we are hasty in suspecting, or unfair or only rigorous in interpreting, vehement or artful in censuring, or inwardly pleased with thinking harshly: then begins that inhuman Sin of Uncharitableness; against which we ought to guard ourselves, by recollecting every Circumstance, that can make in Favour of our Brethren. Sometimes Men appear to differ, when
they

they do not: or to differ much more widely, than they do: their Expressions vary strangely, and perhaps are quite opposite; when, had they but Coolness and Clearness enough to understand one another, they mean, at least very nearly, the same Thing. And this Consideration should induce us to interpret with Candor the Words of those, who may appear to depart from the established Doctrines: but then surely they in Return ought to interpret with at least equal Candor the Forms, in which the established Doctrines are, and long have been, professed in the Church of Christ. But farther: though a Person may be in a palpable Error, possibly it may be such, as no exceedingly bad Consequences will attend: or though the Article be important, it may not be essential. Or, however fundamentally he may err in one Point, he may agree with us in all or most others; nay, be as zealous for them, as we are: and some kind Notice ought to be taken of that.

Besides, let his Errors reach to ever so many and material Points; yet, to make him personally criminal in any considerable Degree, he must not only have had such Means of Information, as are, strictly speaking, sufficient; but his Rejection of those Means, or Failure of being

influenced by them, must have arisen from a worse Cause, than mere human Fallibility, or such Inattention and Prepossession as are incident to the better Sort of Minds. For when these alone mislead him, he hath good Ground surely for an humble Hope, that his gracious Maker will not impute to him for Sin, the Faults of which he was ignorantly guilty. Still the Mistakes, even of such a one, may be greatly detrimental to Society, to Virtue, to Religion: and therefore the public Warning of general Denunciations against them, may both be useful and requisite, and such Denunciations are far from deserving to be condemned as uncharitable. But then they must be understood, like most other general Expressions, with due Limitations. And before we can apply them to particular Persons, there are so many unknown Circumstances to be taken into the Account, and so many Allowances to be made, which, without seeing into the Heart, cannot be made justly, that the rational, as well as Christian, Rule is, not to *judge another Man's Servant*. Our Concern is, to believe and act right, ourselves: as for those around us, *to their own Master they stand or fall*, and we should be very backward to cast those out, whom perhaps *God will receive* ^y. Or, how-

^y Rom. xiv. 3, 4.

ever bad an Opinion we may conceive any peculiar Aggravations oblige us to entertain of their future Condition in the next World ; or however necessary we may judge it *after a first and second Admonition to reject* ² them from Communion with us ; we are bound by the most sacred Ties, neither to do them any private, nor procure them any public, Injury or Hardship ; but use them with all possible prudent Mildness and Tenderneſs : which is likely to reclaim them if any Thing can ; and ſhould it not, they will ſurely remain Objects of Pity, as well as Diſlike.

Theſe are the Rules, which plainly ſuit our preſent State of Imperfection. And may the careful Obſervation of them bring us all ſafely to a better : wherein, *that which is perfect being come, that which is in Part ſhall be done away. For now we ſee through a Glaſs darkly ; but then Face to Face : now we know in Part ; but then ſhall we know as alſo we are known. And now abideth Faith, Hope, Charity, theſe three : but the greateſt of theſe is Charity* ².

² Tit. iii. 10.

² 1 Cor. xiii. 10, 12, 13.

F I N I S.



